

Morning

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A tiny fragment of wind, no larger than a sparrow feather, curls through the bedroom window and settles on Edna's grateful cheek. The thunderstorm had roused her once during the night but, for the first time in months, she had not had any trouble getting back to sleep. Maybe, finally, things are going to be all right. She involuntarily pushes the thought away, not wishing to tempt fate.

She rearranges the pillows and props up on her elbow, enjoying the clean stiffness of the air-dried cotton sheets. She lifts her eyes and gazes out past the double-hung window and across the fields toward the sunrise. The wind rustles the lilac bushes in the yard below. The scent of lilacs and the reassuring tang of fresh rain and soybean fields drifts through the room. The sharp black lines of the heavy, receding storm are suspended low in the eastern sky and a sliver of the sun glows from behind a cloud a couple of ticks (as George might have said) above the horizon. A year ago, she would have said a morning like this was absolutely perfect in every possible way.

She lies back down and lets her eyes drift closed. The chickens will have to wait a few minutes this morning. She anticipates the exaggerated apology she will deliver when the time comes. "So sorry to keep you girls waiting today," she will say. "I hope I haven't thrown off anyone's schedule." She smiles to herself. "Excuse me, ma'am, but I believe you are sitting on something I need." She opens her eyes and traces the edge of the familiar old water stain in the plaster ceiling extending from the light fixture to the corner. Years ago, a water cistern in the attic overflowed. George had always intended to repair the damage but had not gotten to it before the heart attack. She closes her eyes again and tugs the sheet and comforter taut.

The phone rings. "Oh, for goodness sake!" One of her friends, no doubt, calling to check on her. Since George's funeral six months ago, her friends have prodded her. She protests, but takes their advice. She knows she is fortunate that people continue to fret and fuss. Other widows are soon lonely and abandoned. She peels back the covers, pokes her toes into her slippers, and walks around to George's side of the bed to answer the phone, pausing a few moments before answering.

Her new routine is becoming comfortable. She sleeps in the same room where her parents slept when she was a girl. Every morning she looks out over the same fields her Grandpa Morris worked with a horse-drawn plow. She spends most Sundays in the church where she and George were married 39 years ago this coming June.

George handled most of the finances and decisions; now they are her responsibility. Some decisions are inevitable; she knows that. One of these days, for instance, she will need to get rid of the chickens, the tractor, George's clothes, and several lifetimes of accumulated belongings in the basement. None of the tasks seem urgent, though. She remembers Grandma

pushing Uncle Warren to sell the harness for the four-horse hitch after Grandpa Morris bought his first tractor. “Polish it up real nice and sell it before the leather gets too stiff and no one wants it!” The harness still hangs on big hooks in the shed.

Besides, she is more concerned about her children, especially Michael, than she is about herself. Michael sounded so good when they spoke on the phone over the weekend. He says he has a lead on a new job and seems so hopeful. Michael has always been a lost puppy and, even now, seems to bump along, just barely scraping by. He has such a good heart – trusting, loving. He’s loyal and generous to his friends and they sometimes take advantage of him. Jennifer, on the other hand, is the overachiever. Her career keeps her traveling so much that she is too busy for a relationship. Maybe this new fellow will be the one.

Edna plops down on the edge of the mattress and picks up the receiver with a melodic “Good morning!”

“Hello. Is this Edna Evans?” The voice is calm and professional. Not one of her friends. A woman’s voice. “This is Courtney Davidson, I’m a social worker at Eddington Medical Center. I have some news for you about your son, Michael.”

Edna sits up straight. A chill shoots through her spine and spreads through her arms and face. She grasps the phone with both hands.

“Yes. This is Edna Evans.” She presses the soles of her feet flat to the floor through her slippers. “Oh, my goodness! Can I talk to him? What happened? Is anyone there with him?”

“Mrs. Evans, I’m sorry to have to discuss this over the telephone.”

Edna will later remember only small fragments of the subsequent conversation and she becomes alternately numb and alert as the woman explains in some detail that Michael was brought to Eddington after being in a motorcycle accident.

“Mrs. Evans, he is safely tucked into the intensive care unit on the sixth floor.” Edna immediately has an image of him with clean white hospital sheets tightly wrapping around his large chest and belly.

The social worker apparently makes these types of calls frequently. As the woman continues to describe how it is not possible to predict his recovery or even talk to her, Edna becomes increasingly worried. When she is unable to tell her what she might expect to happen over the next couple of days, Edna becomes alarmed. She knows from television that they sometimes tell people that their loved one is very ill, delaying the news that they are actually dead until the “next of kin” makes it to the hospital.

Mrs. Evans, I can tell you that he does not appear to be in any pain whatsoever. I do have a couple more questions for you. By chance, does Michael have a Health Care Power of Attorney or a Living Will? That would be helpful.”

Edna closes her eyes. “No, I don’t think he does. He never mentioned anything like that.”

“That’s fine, Mrs. Evans. Not a problem. Lastly, is there anyone there with you? You should have someone else drive you. Should I call someone to help get you to the hospital?”

“No, I’ll be all right. I’ll call one of my friends or my daughter. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Thank you very much for calling. Have a nice day.” Her hands move to return the receiver to the cradle but she pauses and speaks into the phone again. “Oh. Oh, my. Oh, please take good care of my baby.”

The line clicks before she is finished speaking and Edna’s hands drop limply to her lap. What should she do first? Who should she call? She is shaking. “If you wish to make a call, hang up and dial again.” Edna places the receiver carefully back on the cradle.

“Poor Michael!” She turns instinctively to George’s pillow. She tilts her head and pauses a moment to smooth the hand-stitched coverlet. “I’ll call Jenny first,” she says aloud, although she knows that Jennifer is heading out this morning on a business trip. She also knows from experience that Jennifer usually lets any call from Edna go to her voicemail, especially early in the morning or late at night.

Indeed, Jennifer’s message comes on after four rings. Edna will listen later with Jennifer and be shocked at how she sounds. Dazed. Flat. “Jenny, please call your mother. I need to talk to you. I love you, Jenny.” That is it. Jennifer will apologize for not calling back saying she was heading out the door to the airport and did not think the call was urgent. Edna will apologize several times for not being clear about why she was calling.

Edna steadies herself on the wall as she heads to the bathroom. The old flooring creaks along the way. She decides against taking a shower and finishes up by washing her face alternatively with hot and cold water. Back in the bedroom, she calls Peggy Connors. Peggy, also a widow, is very organized and, Edna knows, gets up early every day.

“Peggy, good morning. I need a favor. If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, I need a ride to Eddington this morning. Michael was in some sort of accident. I don’t know what we will find there.” She realizes she has used the word “we.”

Peggy, of course, is up, dressed, cheerful, and in the midst of rolling out pie dough. Peggy has a full day of baking planned but is happy to put everything on hold, no questions asked. “I’ll be right over.”

“Give me a little while, Peggy. I need to get dressed and take care of a couple of things. Can you be here in forty-five minutes?”

Edna looks in her closet. *George, what should I wear to go see Michael in intensive care?* She picks out some clean dark navy slacks, a print top, and comfortable shoes thinking she might have to walk long distances in the unfamiliar, large hospital. *I want to look presentable so the doctors and nurses know that Michael comes from a good home.* God only knows what he was

wearing when he was hurt. She takes a sweater from the middle drawer of the old oak dresser thinking it might be cold at the hospital. Should she bring photographs? Her phonebook? Some keepsake from his bedroom? She will ask Peggy stop at the bank's automatic teller as they go through town so she can pay for gas and buy some food in the hospital cafeteria. Maybe she should she pack a bag or at least bring a toothbrush. Perhaps she should notify Pastor Jorgensen, although maybe that should wait until after they know more about Michael's condition. *Michael's condition.* She rolls the phrase around. Edna stands at the edge of an abyss buffeted by a strong, howling storm.

She should eat something. Downstairs, she finds half a grapefruit and makes some toast. She sets the dishes in the drain and wishes she had told Peggy to come sooner.

The morning air is cool. She steps out the front door and onto the porch to wait, watching down the gravel road for Peggy's approaching car. She glances at her watch and realizes that it will be at least twenty minutes until her very punctual driver appears. She sets down her purse and sits on the bottom cement step to wait.

"George, I wish you were still here," she whispers, although she knows he would have been completely flustered, insisting on driving. It would have been a terrifying too-fast then too-slow odyssey culminating in a lost-in-the-big-city "I-know-where-I'm-going" search for the hospital. If the hospital parking lot cost more than a dollar per day, he would have spent twenty minutes driving around looking for street parking. By the time they had finally gotten in the building, she would have spent as much time soothing him as steeling herself to see their boy.

The sky brightens and the last remnants of the storm disappear from the distant horizon. The sun warms the air and, as it climbs, will soon evaporate the thin layer of rainwater from the wet grass, the walkways, and the drive. The old concrete steps are comfortable and familiar. She clasps her arms around her knees and interlaces her fingers tightly. "I almost forgot, Lord, to thank You for the day's blessings, for food, for friendship, for love. Place your hands on Michael and Jenny's shoulders and give them strength for the unknown challenges that lie ahead." She pauses. "And, Lord, protect all those in need wherever they might be this day."

Edna stands and stretches, glancing again at her watch. There is enough time. She reaches back inside the front door for her basket. She walks to the side yard, lifts the latch, and swings wide the metal gate, closing it quietly behind as she does every morning. The hinges on the wooden door of her grandmother's chicken coop complain as she steps over the threshold. The hens eye her warily but without alarm. She speaks quietly to the first bird and they exchange gazes as Edna slides her hand between the straw and the alert hen, pushing her fingers toward the prize beneath. "Excuse me, ma'am, I believe you're sitting on something I need." The hen eventually stands in protest and flaps down to the floor, scurrying away. Edna closes her fingers gently around the egg, noting its gritty texture and registering its warmth and size. She turns it over to assure herself that it is without crack or flaw then sets it in the basket. She moves down the row of nests, issuing one apology after another, and wonders when she will be back to gather the eggs again.

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