

- 1948 -

The old house was hushed when they drove up at 10, almost as if it were holding its breath. There was a lamp burning in the front hall and the light it cast out the parlor window barely reached the long front porch. Wendell told Ruth to stay in the car while he got her suitcase out of the trunk and carried it to the porch. Then he came back for her and carried her up the four steps to the wide wooden door. She didn't protest. The snow was well over her shoe tops and her pregnancy made battling it more difficult. Her brother wiped his feet on the mat, then carried her suitcase down the hall to the nursery while Ruth hung up her coat and hat. Old habits in Gram's tidy house hung on.

"Where's Dad?" she said when he came back.

"In our old room." He smiled at her and went into the kitchen.

Ruth walked down the hallway but her eagerness to be there was evaporating. She had been angry at the long delays caused by the deep snow that clogged the train tracks, and she had been afraid he would die before she arrived. Now she was afraid of what she would find.

An oil lamp in a far corner of the boys' room gave off a warm glow. The sight of it pleased her, for her father had always preferred lamp light to the starkness of the electric bulb. He'd put off wiring the house all through their childhood.

Robert lay in one of the boys' narrow beds. The other had been pushed against a wall. His mother Alice sat to the left of the bed, reading from the big family Bible. Her voice was low and deep, more mannish than ever. Ruth caught a whispered phrase or two, recognized the Psalms. Her father had always loved them, reciting them at evening prayers. Her grandmother didn't look up at her or acknowledge her presence in anyway. Ruth wasn't surprised. She and Alice had never had much use for each other.

Mabel Edith stood on the other side of the bed, wiping her husband's face with a cloth. A pitcher and a bowl of water, a glass and a brown bottle stood on a small table next to the bed. She smiled when Ruth entered the room, but her face was slack with fatigue and her eyes glistened with tears. Ruth stepped up to the bed and embraced her mother. Then, finally, she looked down at her father.

His eyes were closed, his breathing ragged and labored. His skin had grown even grayer since the last time she had seen him, and the cancer had eaten away whatever spare pounds he'd once had. Ruth leaned over and kissed his cheek. The stubble was rough to her lips, and she could smell the sour sweat of illness. Her sadness deepened. Her father had always been a fastidious man and he would not have wanted her to see him this way. But vanity had no place here, not with the angel of death waiting out there in the dark to take him.

"I'm here, Dad," she said. "It's Ruth. I've come home to be with you."

Her father made no sign that he heard, and her heart sank. On the train, Ruth had imagined that he would open his eyes and know her the way he had always known her. Of all those in her family, he mattered most, and she wasn't ready to let him go.

After a moment, Mabel Edith took her daughter's hand and gently pulled her from the room. Alice paid them no mind, just went on moving her lips over the words.

Ruth followed her mother to the kitchen. Wendell had put the perk pot on the wood stove and the smell filled the room. He had also put out roast beef and butter and bread on the table.

“Thank you, dear,” Mabel Edith said, nodding at her older son. He smiled back at her and at Ruth, who went over and wrapped her arms around him. Her brother was a big kind man and for a moment she let him hold her.

Her mother got down some plates from the cupboard. “Ruth, how long since you fed that baby anything?”

Ruth put both hands on her belly. “Too long, probably, Mom. I don’t have much appetite.”

“Well, that child does. So you eat anyway. Wendell is going to make you a nice sandwich and I’m going to open a jar of peaches and you’re going to eat a big dish. You hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Wendell grinned at her and Ruth smiled back. They were adults now with kids of their own, but they were still children in this house.

The women watched as Wendell made four sandwiches. He handed one on a plate to Ruth and took one for himself, which he wrapped in his handkerchief. He went over and bent down to kiss his mother. “I’m heading home. Go over to the school and call me if there’s any change or you need anything from me.” He looked at Ruth, who nodded. Their parents still refused to have a telephone in the house. It wasn’t the expense, they said, but the intrusion into the sanctity of their home. The children all assumed that this was, as most things were, their grandmother’s doing.

Ruth followed her brother out and stood in the doorway as he stepped down off the wide porch and waded through the snow to the car. It had started to fall again but in a pretty way, soft and gentle, and Ruth felt her spirits lift just a little from the dread of the time ahead.

When she got back to the kitchen, she sat down and ate the sandwich. Her mother came out of the pantry with the promised peaches and served up a dish. Then she poured a cup of coffee for her daughter and a cup of hot water for herself and sat down next to her daughter. Ruth put her hand over her mother’s. “Tell me all of what the doctors said.”

Mabel Edith sighed. “They couldn’t remove the tumors. There were too many and in too many places. They spared him the difficulty of the surgery, and I thank the Master for that. He believes it would have cost him his strength, not a fair exchange for a few more days, as he might have not been able to come home to us.”

Ruth pushed back the tears. “So this is the end.”

Her mother nodded. “I think he’s been waiting for all of you to arrive.” She looked away as if to think about what she would say next, but it was simple information when she spoke. “Roberta is coming first thing tomorrow. Glen is driving her to Coeur d’Alene, and Wayne or Wendell will go get her. I’ve left that to your brothers.”

It took Ruth a moment to realize her mother had called her sister’s husband by name. She wondered what shift had occurred for that to be so. She’d have to ask her sister.

They sat silent for a time. The house was quiet except for the hiss and pop of the wood stove and the ticking of the grandfather clock in the library, her father’s life running out with each move of the hands.

“Who’s helping with the children?” Mabel Edith said finally.

“Colin John’s mother is staying over. They’ll be all right.”

“I thought you might bring Gwennie with you. I do love that little girl.”

Ruth felt the old defensiveness rise up but she kept her voice neutral. “I figured we might have trouble caring for her and for Dad at the same time. And with the weather bad and the trip so long, well...”

“I’m sure you made the right choice, dear. And she’ll be fine.”

There was another silence and Ruth could feel her mother's attention move back down the hall. "Ryan wants you to come and visit soon. He talks about 'Gammy this' and 'Gammy that' and wonders why he has two grandmothers but only one mother."

Her mother smiled. "Does he favor Robert or Colin John?"

"To tell you the truth, I think he takes after Wendell. At least he has that same seriousness and a rather sly wit, even for a 7-year-old."

"And Gwennie? Who is she growing into?"

"Ah, it's too soon to tell, Mother."

"But we get a sense, don't we? I knew so much about you when you were a baby and by 2 you were definitely who you were to become." She smiled at her daughter.

Ruth looked at her mother but didn't smile in return. "Gwennie is difficult."

Mabel Edith frowned.

"Well, no, that's not it exactly. She's clingy, sensitive to noises.

Wants to be held a lot."

"Some children need more reassurance. Wayne certainly did."

"I guess. But her need seems excessive. Too much of the time I can't make her happy no matter what I do."

"Maybe it isn't about happiness, dear. Maybe you just need to love her a bit more."

Ruth nodded but it was not in agreement. And to forestall any more of the conversation, she looked down at the last of the peaches in the dish and forced herself to eat them, Alice's voice harsh in her head: *Waste not, want not.*

Fruit had been a kind of magic in their childhood. It came from far away and cost a great deal. The one lament their parents and grandparents had about leaving the Midwest was the soil. Everything grew in the rich loam of Illinois and Missouri. Everyone had a kitchen garden. The Idaho Panhandle was another story. The wealth was still in the ground but it was in minerals, silver and lead. The top soil, what there was of it, was dry and dusty. It supported pine trees and scrub oak and not much else. So the fruit had to come from Washington or California.

Ruth pushed her dish away. "Shall I tidy up?"

"No, I'll do it later. Don't you need some rest? It may be a long night."

"I'm fine. Why don't you lie down for an hour or so? I'll go and sit with him."

"All right." her mother said. "But come and get me if there's any change."



Wendell didn't head straight home. He drove instead down the long hill into Kellogg and stopped at the *News* office. It was the safest place he knew.

He parked in the alley and went through the back door into the silence and the smells he loved so much—machinery, ink, newsprint. He knew his way through the maze of machines even in the dark, and he didn't turn on a light until he reached his desk and its lamp.

He had spent more time in this big room than almost anywhere else in the world, maybe not more than in his parents' home, but certainly more than in his own. He'd been a child in this room, a teenager, a young man, and now he was 34 and the editor since his father had become too ill to work. Soon he would own it, for better or worse.

It was difficult to imagine this place without the old man. Robert had become editor in 1912, three years before Wendell was born. He had spent every day there except Sundays and the weeks the state legislature was in session. His father was the *Kellogg Evening News*.

Wendell wondered what it would take to become that himself. Could he do this all the rest of his life? Live here in this little town, care about this community the way his parents had? Before the war, he had much bigger plans for his life but that had all changed.

He felt weary. He knew that more than just the paper would become his responsibility. The care of his mother and Gram would fall to him too, just as it was up to him to make the funeral arrangements. It helped to know everyone in town, helped to see the caring and respect people had for his father. Now if only the ground wouldn't freeze before the burial.

He poured two fingers from the whiskey bottle in the bottom desk drawer into the glass that always sat on his desk. He had only taken a sip when the phone rang.

"I knew I'd find you there." Dorothy's voice was low and husky, one of the things he loved about her.

"And here I am."

"How is he?"

"I didn't see him. Just dropped Ruth off and made sure she and Mom got something to eat."

His wife said nothing. He'd learned to recognize this kind of silence as her biting her tongue, holding back something unkind, and so he was grateful for the quiet.

"Coming home?"

"On my way."

"Make it now, okay." It wasn't a question. She waited, perhaps for his agreement, but he didn't speak and she knew he wouldn't and she hung up.

He poured another finger in the glass and turned out the light and sat a few more moments. Then he drank the whiskey down and went home to his wife and son.



Alice had fallen asleep when Ruth tiptoed in. Her whiskered chin lay on her chest and even her ramrod spine had softened in fatigue. Ruth didn't think she had ever seen her grandmother so unguarded, this woman who was the epitome of stern and proper. She wished she had a camera to prove to the others that such a moment could happen.

None of the children knew how old their grandmother was. She said she didn't remember and she refused to have her birthday celebrated. Ruth figured she was at least 90, maybe more. Their mother had written that Alice too had been ill, her symptoms mimicking the illness of her son, and Ruth could see that the same pallor of ill health coated her grandmother's skin.

Her father was unchanged. Ruth took up the damp washcloth and went to wipe his face, but something held her back. They had been a family of little touching. There was respect and courtesy and kindness in her parents. Oh, so much kindness. But there wasn't much touch, not once they were old enough to do for themselves. It was Colin John who had taught her about affection. He seemed to crave it, sometimes beyond her ability to give. And Gwennie took after him. Between the two of them, she felt stretched thin.

Ryan was so much easier. He had her reserve, her reticence. She smiled at the thought of her son. He had saved her in those horrible months in California when she thought her grief over little June would kill her. She had gotten up and got dressed for Ryan. Made food for Ryan. Consoled herself with his little body in her arms. It wasn't enough but it helped. She'd been sorry when he'd grown too big for her lap.

The cloth went cold in her hand and she took the bowl out to the kitchen where she rinsed it and poured hot water from the kettle that always sat on the back of the stove. Added cool water from the tap and went back to the infirmary. There was no change.

She looked at her watch. Midnight had come and gone. She had been up a long time already. She took the chair to the right of the bed and put her hand over her father's. It was warm but so thin that the veins ridged up. She thought about times she had held that hand. On her way to Sunday School. Walking down into town. When was it he had stopped holding hers? When she was 7 or 8, maybe.

She knew she should pray but for what? The hour was late, the end in sight. She couldn't convince herself otherwise.

She had gone back to church at the first diagnosis. Her father had had years of stomach problems. He had always assumed it was ulcers but the Spokane doctor said cancer. Ruth had prayed for a miracle, for health and more years for him. She had prayed for faith that her prayers meant something, that they were reaching the Master. But he had wasted away and suffered from pain. Finally he had taken the train to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota with Roberta and Wendell, but it was too late. So she had stopped praying although she still went to church each Sunday. It was superstition that drove her, fear that her father would die before she could see him again.

She looked over at Gram. There had been times when she had marveled at the woman's faith in the Methodists' Jesus, the Master as they all called him. Alice was a second-generation Methodist, her parents direct converts to John Wesley's teachings. She had brought her husband into the fold, a condition of their marriage, and Llewellyn had been an active and important man in the church both in Missouri and here in Idaho. They had raised their four sons in the steely principles of abstinence and obedience and made it clear that their grandchildren should be brought up the same. And they had been. But then they went out into the world and the world had changed and it had changed them.

Her father shifted his hand, and she wondered if her touch hurt him. She put her hand in her lap but kept her eyes on his face. Would she look into his eyes again? That seemed unlikely and she pushed a sob back down into her chest. And then after another minute he went quiet and she closed her eyes and drifted somewhere else.

Her father's moaning and her grandmother's voice woke her. "Yes, Gram. I'm here."

"What is the hour?"

"Just past 3, ma'am."

"Where is your mother?"

"She is lying down for a bit. She is exhausted."

"We all are. Death is a tiring business."

Ruth was silent a moment. Then she said, "Is it time for his medicine?"

"Yes, go get your mother."

"I can do it."

"No! Your mother knows the dose. She knows what to do. I don't have the patience to show you."

Still Ruth hesitated. Her mother was so tired and surely she could do this for her.

"Go. You are making your father suffer."

A childhood of hurts and shame surfaced and she willed them away from her, and then she went out and down the dark hall. She knocked softly on her mother's door and went in without waiting for a reply. A lamp burned low and spread a soft yellow light over the pillows and

counterpane. Her mother lay on her back with a blanket over her, her sturdy sensible shoes sticking out from the end.

“Dad needs the medicine,” Ruth said softly.

“All right, dear. I’m coming.” Her mother’s voice was clear, no sleep in it.

Ruth went out to the kitchen. She made tea and poured a little in two cups adding sugar and milk and put the rest of the peaches in two small bowls. She knew it was wishful thinking, neither woman would eat anything, but she felt the need to try. Her grandmother ate only at meals and then sparingly, and her parents and grandparents did not believe in the use of stimulants. The presence of coffee in the house was a concession that Mabel Edith and Robert had made to their grown children after much debate. Ruth drank her tea in the kitchen, so as not to offend, then headed down the hall with the tray.



Across town, Wayne roused himself from the half-sleep that was the best he could get. Somehow lying in bed next to Helen brought on the worst of the dreams and the deepest of the panic. So he smoked and listened to the low voice of the radio in the front room until it went silent and then he just watched the night go by. If he kept his focus on this moment, this place, he was mostly all right and sometimes he dozed.

The house was quiet. He heard Helen cough, then settle back down. He listened for the babies, but they didn’t stir. He looked at his watch, just making out the hands in the faint light. 4:30. He went into the bathroom. Washed his face, combed his hair without turning on the light. He didn’t need the light to see how much his hands were shaking. There was no way he could shave. His mother would be disappointed and Gram would disapprove, but these days they always did.

He went out into the kitchen and got the coffee makings ready for Helen, set out some breakfast things, took out the trash. The night was cold and dark. No stars so more snow was likely. He’d need to set off soon for Roberta before it got bad.

He’d agreed to meet Dell up at the folks’ house before he left. Wayne wasn’t sure what they’d do there. He didn’t understand how his brother could bear to see the old man like this. They both knew death too well to pretend it wasn’t coming, and he had already had his fill.