

## The Calling

If Eddie Malone had been born anyone else, he probably wouldn't have liked him much either, and in a way, that's exactly what this situation was. That's why, he supposed, it was pretty much inevitable he'd end up in a place like this.

Twin Oaks Retirement Home got its name from the two large trees flanking it on either side, creating a picture-perfect scene of peace and tranquility, which they were quick to capture on the brochures for visitors and prospective families to disguise what life was really like for those living out their days here. You see, the place, like Eddie himself, was changing.

Old Eddie had done some things he'd regretted over the course of his life. Like what he'd done to get a spot in here in the first place, but all that was history now. Old Eddie existed in a place he no longer recognized, and the new Eddie, the one that resided here in the present, resented everything.

He resented the pureed fruit. He resented being told to eat his vegetables like a surly child or having to have them cut up into little pieces lest he choke to death on them. Eddie had actually started to choke on an errant Brussels sprout not long after he'd arrived at Twin Oaks and for a moment, he'd considered resisting the urge to fight it. Some days he still wished he hadn't.

He resented the constant stifling heat they kept the place at to keep the residents from falling sick, which ironically made him feel even queasier from the smell of boiled cabbage and piss that permeated the hallways whenever he dared venture from his room.

There was a lamp on a table beside his bed, one with a cord on it he could reach if he needed to without the need to get up in case he had a fall. For now, the room was lit enough by a thin wedge of light squeezing its way through a gap in the threadbare curtains the evening staff had failed to entirely close until it splayed itself prostrate on the floor next to Eddie's bed.

As he did most nights, Eddie lay on his back atop the sheets in the half-gloom watching a coffee-colored water stain slowly spread like a cancer across the ceiling tiles. It reminded him of one of those ink-blot tests, the ones you'd see on TV, where the career-weary detective flashes cards at a suspect to determine whether they have a personality disorder like schizophrenia or some kind of psychosis.

Eddie laughed quietly to himself.

This place would make you go crazy, eventually.

He checked the clock radio on the bedside table.

Seventeen minutes past two in the morning.

They say you need less sleep as you get older. Right now, Eddie felt very old indeed. He used to listen to the radio at night, but he stopped doing that six months ago, when he'd been told, somewhat ironically, the noise was keeping his fellow residents awake.

So much for peace and tranquility.

Even with the door to his room closed he could hear the constant scuff of footsteps on the carpet or the squeak of a gurney being wheeled down the hallway outside. Right now, someone was screaming from down the hall. Eddie recognized the voice. It was that crazy bitch June. Again. Not that he could blame her. This place was hell's waiting room, and it would be her turn soon enough. Soon she'd be wandering the halls pleading with the night staff to help her find the baby she'd lost sixty years ago.

Abruptly the screaming turned to sobbing.

They'd probably given her a dose of something to calm her down. Eddie hoped it would be lethal, for both their sakes.

The nursing staff didn't like the residents fully closing the doors to their rooms at night, probably in case they found one of them dead the next morning, but Eddie didn't care much for the way they'd come in unannounced either, disturbing what little privacy you could get in here by poking their heads around the door with a clipboard in hand, to check off that the occupant of Room 17 was still breathing, so he kept it closed anyway. He'd seen enough of the world outside these four walls during his lifetime to know most of it was shit. He was happy to be walled away from it. Besides the clock radio, the only other connection to the world beyond his room was an old landline telephone which occupied a place on the desk beneath the window. Eddie assumed it belonged with the room as he had no living relatives to call, and it was probably toll-barred in case he tried to. Eddie Alone, he'd heard one of the night staff refer to him recently, and that suited him just fine. He was quite happy to be left alone. After all, he'd never really thought of himself as a very nice person. There were things he'd done in own his life he wasn't proud of, including things he'd done to get into this place. At the end of the day, it was, as they said, better than the alternative.

So, it was as much of a surprise to Eddie as anyone when he received the first call.

At first, the sound seemed distant, as if it were coming from the nurses' station down the hall, but by the third ring, the electronic trill started to get louder, more insistent.

*Why didn't someone answer it?*

Eddie opened his eyes. It was only then that he realized he must've, at some point, drifted off to sleep because it was then that he noticed the annoying warble was accompanied by faint flashing as the light on the phone beneath the window winked on and off.

He waited.

One of the night nurses would inevitably be in soon to check on the noise. With any luck, it would be Miguel, the jovial Filipino who often picked up the night shifts for extra cash and knew when to leave. Then again, it could be that sour bitch Pugh.

Eddie swung his legs over the side of the bed and steadying himself with a hand on the bedside table, pushed himself onto his feet.

He shuffled his way toward the desk by the window. The phone continued chirping, like a baby bird demanding to be fed.

"Alright, alright, I'm coming," Eddie muttered, still wondering where the hell the night staff were.

*This had better be good,* he thought.

Still, the phone persisted. How long had it been ringing now? It would be just his luck by the time he reached it the caller would've hung up. He would've. And who the hell calls at...he stole a glance back at the clock radio next to the bed...quarter to four in the morning.

Finally, he reached the desk and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

"Hello?"

Nothing. Just as he thought.

Eddie went to place the receiver back down but then thought he heard something.

Breathing?

"Hello? Who is this?"

"Hello, Eddie."

"Who is this? How do you know my name?"

But Eddie had a feeling he already knew.

## The Midwife's Tale

The girl, in Virginia's eyes barely more than a child herself, is lying on the bed panting frantically. Sweat forms in beads at her brow, before running down her cheeks. The other nurse in the room wipes the girl's forehead with a rolled-up hand towel in her free hand, the other is being gripped between the girl's white knuckles. The towel is already soaked.

"It's okay," Virginia reassures from her position at the end of the bed. "It's going to be okay. You're nearly there now. One more push and we'll be there."

From her vantage point, she can see the baby's head crowning. Normally at this point, everything happens quite quickly. Driven by pain and instinct the woman will be guided by an irresistible primal force to bear down and force out the life which she has carried inside her for the last nine months, into the world.

But something is different this time.

The young girl is resisting that urge, perhaps in fear of the final moments of pain.

Virginia realizes she needs to get this baby out now.

"Come on," she urges. "One last big push."

The girl in the bed starts panting again, gathering all her remaining will and strength to reach the end of her ordeal.

"Now push!" Virginia coaxes.

The woman's panting suddenly stops. Instead, it's replaced by a faint hissing sound as she exhales while biting down on her lip and begins the final leg of her journey.

In front of Virginia's outstretched hands, the baby's head finally emerges, then stops. From this point, it's just a matter of the shoulders twisting and then the baby will slide smoothly into the world.

A new life begins.

Virginia has been a part of this miracle many times before.

But this time something is wrong.

The baby doesn't move any further. She is stuck.

Virginia watches on in horror as the tiny face in front of her begins to turn blue. The nurse at the other end of the bed looks toward Virginia, there is a concerned look growing in her eyes, one she is careful not to face toward the young girl lying on the bed.

"Keep pushing!" Virginia urges as she places her hands around the baby's head and starts to pull. She knows all too well that things can turn on an instant in situations like this. The hissing sound emerging from the young girl, like a leak in a tire, rises rapidly to a groan, and then a loud primal scream that fills the room and echoes off the walls.

*Thank God the father isn't here to see this.*

The thought flickers briefly and is quickly dismissed.

She has a job to do, and she must act quickly.

Virginia braces herself against the end of the bed and pulls. The tendons in her forearms stand up like thick cords, belying the force she is applying. The girl in the bed arches her back against the agony and lets out a deep guttural sound.

There is tearing.

Thick sticky blood rushes over Virginia's wrists, and then all at once, the baby slips forward into her arms.

The young girl collapses back onto the bed, her eyes rolling back into her head. Virginia is unsure whether she's slipped into unconsciousness or is simply exhausted from the labor. Perhaps both.

The bellowing sounds of the agony of moments before fall away, and suddenly the room falls silent.

In the quiet Virginia becomes acutely aware of the sound of breathing. Her own and that of the young semi-conscious mother in front of her.

And that's all.

Amid the silence, there's something else.

A feeling that begins to fill the room with its emptiness. She is aware of it. The young mother feels it too.

The nurse standing at the pillow looks at Virginia. Her face is an ashen mask. Virginia looks down at the tiny angel in her arms.

The sound of a stillbirth is no sound at all.

"Where is my baby?" A feeble worn-out voice asks from the head of the bed. "Where is she?"

No one in the room replies.

"What's wrong? There's something wrong isn't there?" She looks to the nurse standing beside the pillow. The nurse opens her mouth, but no words emerge. She starts to shake.

"Where is she? Where is my baby?"

"I'm sorry," Virginia whispers. She's still looking down at the wet fleshy bundle in her arms.

"Where is my baby!"

"I'm sorry!" Virginia says, louder this time, before fleeing into the corridor carrying the tiny body of the little baby girl with her.

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She sat in the little staff room at the maternity ward and pressed the cup half-heartedly against her lips, not because it was something she felt she needed, but because that was what was expected. She allowed a few drops of the sweet sickly liquid to touch her lips and dance across her tongue, before swallowing. The tea had long since gone cold. She didn't know what the time was, or how long she'd been sitting here. All she knew was a steady procession of nurses had come had gone, each asking the same question.

"Are you alright?"

No, of course, she wasn't bloody all right.

The Medical Registrar on duty had come and urged her to go home, but home was the last place Virginia wanted to be.

"You shouldn't be alone right now," the Registrar had insisted.

"I'm not alone. I'm in a hospital surrounded by bloody nurses!" She protested.

"Your husband will be worried," the Registrar suggested, trying a different angle.

*Yes, I suppose he would be,* she thought. But just because Earl would be worried, didn't mean he'd understand. How could he? How could a man with whom you'd tried to have children of your own, who'd come to realize that the two of you couldn't give each other what you most wanted, understand?

This in part had been what had driven her to midwifery in the first place. The consolation that even if you couldn't have a child of your own, then perhaps at least you could help someone else to fulfill that destiny for themselves.

Now how does one even begin to explain to their partner that not only can you not have a child of your own, but that you're the reason someone else has now been designated the same fate?

It was as if she'd been tainted with a disease. A curse she wore was bad enough, one which she was now spreading to those she touched, was unbearable.

Eventually, the Registrar had given up and conceded to letting her remain here in the staffroom until she was feeling up to having Earl come and collect her.

She didn't think that was going to happen.

For now, anyway, time as she'd once known it, had been suspended. It was quite possible she might spend the rest of her life sitting on her own in this room beneath the faintly flickering neon light, surrounded by its hospital pink walls, with a steady procession of well-intentioned visitors reassuring her that it wasn't her fault and that sometimes these things just happened.

There was a sound of footfalls in the corridor outside. Another interloper poked her head around the corner to check on her. She asked a question, which Virginia only half heard.

Virginia muttered something in response and forgot what it was almost immediately, but it must have been convincing enough, as the head around the corner of the door disappeared again and the footfalls resumed, echoing off the linoleum floor as they receded down the hall.

Virginia wondered how the young girl was doing. She hadn't seen her in the hours, or however long it had been since the awful thing had happened. The other nurses had been given strict instructions not to talk to her about it, but one had let on that the young girl had been moved to one of the other wards and placed on a heavy sedative.

"It was probably for the best," she'd said. "Given the circumstances."

"Probably for the best," Virginia had repeated listlessly.

Best for who? *Sometimes these things just happen*, a voice echoed in her head. But why? Why did God, or some divine life force, if you believed in such a thing, inflict such pain and suffering, and in such a cruel twist of fate? Why was it there were so many cruel births? So many people were granted the miracle of growing a whole new life, only to have it tragically torn away from them. Why was it there were people like herself and Earl, who would give anything to have a child of their own but couldn't, while others, who had no desire to do so, found themselves pregnant and alone?

Whichever role you found yourself in, life could pitilessly remind you it could all be changed, it could all be taken away, in an instant. It all seemed so arbitrary. When she herself had been a little girl, and she'd lost her favorite toy, a threadbare stuffed teddy she'd carelessly left behind on the bus, and her mother had told her that all things happen for a reason. 'We might not know God's plan at the time, but she should trust things had a reason for working out the way they did.'

She pushed the cup back to her lips and sipped a few more drops of the sweet sickly liquid.

Cold comfort.

But she continued to ponder the thought. What if that little baby girl had survived? Would she have faced a lifetime of struggle? A childhood full of hardships with a struggling young mother, straining to bring her child up on her own?

It was a pointless line of thought. How could she imagine what sort of life the child might've had, any more than she could imagine hers should she have been able to bear a child of her own?

Who was she to judge? She was no stranger to struggle herself. Earl had been out of work for months, and her own meager midwife's salary was barely enough to pay the bills. In recent months they'd been forced to dip further and further into their credit card to pay for their monthly utilities and groceries. Now the high interest was creating an even greater burden, another beast which required regular feeding.

Still, she wished she could go back in time and change that moment. What if she could've pulled her into this world just a little sooner? Life is full of what-ifs. What if she had lived? What had become of her tiny cold body? Virginia wondered. Where was she now? Was she lying in some cold sterile mortuary room at the base of the hospital building right now? What if it hadn't turned out this way? What if she was still alive somehow? What then? The young girl in the maternity ward would certainly never know. Not now.

And then Virginia had an idea, something that might solve everything.

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She'd wandered quietly down the hallway as if nothing had happened. No one seeing her would have given her a passing thought. She was still in her uniform. She didn't look out of place walking along the hospital corridors.

Unless anyone she encountered happened to look a little closer.

Then they would've seen the haunted look in her eyes, the vacant expression, the semi-automated way she approached as if sleepwalking.

Of course, she needed to hurry. The next busybody to poke their head around the corner of the door to the nurses' staffroom would find her missing, and then she'd look very out of place indeed.

She stopped outside the closed door of the administration office. A moment of panic gripped her when she considered whether it might be locked. In her state, she couldn't remember where she'd last put her keys, but as she grasped the cold metal of the doorknob, she felt it turn quietly until the latch clicked and the door pushed inwards.

She slipped inside the little office and pushed the door closed behind her.

The little windowless administration office had been converted from a supply room. There was barely enough room to fit a single desk, but it served its purpose. Sitting atop the desk was a bulky beige computer. Virginia sat at the chair and flicked a switch on the side of the machine's monitor to turn it on.

A blinking green cursor winked on and off.

As one of the midwifery staff, she'd been selected as part of a pilot group to use the new system. The future was electronic they'd been told. The hope was that one day a whole fleet of machines like this one would be used instead of the current bureaucracy of paper forms which needed to be completed in triplicate, checked, posted, and filed.

Virginia logged on and navigated her way to the registrations menu she'd been trained to use. She tapped at the keyboard, entering the date, time, and hospital address.

She paused when she arrived at a blank field on the screen.

<MOTHER'S NAME(S)>

The cursor blinked on and off impatiently.

Then she typed her own name into the empty fields.

She leaned back in the chair and looked at the completed form in front of her glowing green in the dim light of the administration room.

Her finger hovered over the keyboard.

Suddenly it felt as if gravity was dragging her hand down. She hit the ENTER button and the form on the screen disappeared.

Outside she heard the metronome of footfalls on the hospital linoleum.

She held her breath, but the footfalls went past the closed administration office.

Quickly she logged out of the registration system and flicked off the switch on the side of the computer like it was hot.

She waited, breathing heavily in the silence of the little office until she was convinced there was no one in the hallway outside. Then she slipped quietly into the corridor and hurried back toward the nurses' staffroom, praying to herself as she walked that no other well-meaning intruders had thought to check on her while she'd been gone.

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The queue to the tellers snaked its way back and forth between the velvet stanchion ropes like the wait for an exclusive club.

Virginia glanced at her watch.

This had been a bad idea.

She'd been standing in line for almost five minutes already and had barely moved more than three places forward. She'd left Earl waiting in the car under the pretext that she needed to get a top-up of cash for groceries.

He'd be getting impatient.

He'd already asked why she was getting out money for the weekly shop when it was only Thursday. Why hadn't she gotten everything the last time she'd been to the grocery store? He'd be thinking that surely she knew money was tight enough as it was, without having to spend more on extra trips.

She clutched the paper of the withdrawal slip in her pocket and forced herself to relax in case the sweat forming on her fingers smudged the words and she'd have to fill out another one.

The queue moved forward another place.

Ahead she scanned the teller counters. There were two tellers on. Two! In the middle of the lunch hour! The other two stations were blocked off with signs assuring that the owner would be 'back soon'. Eventually, another teller emerged from a hidden back room and took down one of the remaining two signs.

The queue shuffled forward once more.

Eventually, she stood at the head of the line. The new teller finished with some paperwork from the customer before her and waved for her to approach the counter.

"How can I help you today?" The teller asked through a cheery grin.

Virginia took the slip of paper from her pocket and placed it down against the dark Formica of the counter, smoothing out the creases from clutching it in her pocket.

"I'd like to make a withdrawal, but first, can I check my balance? I'm expecting a payment."

The woman on the other side of the counter tapped at a keyboard. "Yes," she smiled, "I can see a couple of childcare payments have come through actually."

"Can I have a printout?"

The young teller entered something on the keyboard and a printer somewhere below the counter noisily sprung into life. The teller leaned down, tore off a piece of paper, and handed it to her.

Virginia scanned the transaction list. There had indeed been two payments. By direct credit. One per fortnight.

"I'd like to withdraw some cash please." She tried to make her voice sound casual, as if it had been exactly as she'd expected which, in a way, she supposed it had. Nonetheless, her hand trembled as she filled out the figures on the paper withdrawal slip before sliding it back across the counter.

She noted the young teller's pupils widen slightly at the figure printed in shaky ink on the slip. Maybe it was too much? She cursed herself. She shouldn't have risked arousing suspicion. It was too late now. It was too late weeks ago, she thought, when she should've put a stop to this. She had an excuse; she'd been in a place of extreme stress. They would've understood. Wouldn't they? She brushed the last-minute doubt from her mind. She had to go through with it now. She was committed.

"This is almost everything in your account, do you want to withdraw all of this?"

"Yes, please. In cash."

The teller nodded, tapped away at the keyboard, then after what seemed like an eternity turned back and asked; “What denomination would you like it in?”

“Fifties would be fine.”

The teller reached into a drawer beneath the counter and methodically counted out the neat craps bills. She tapped the small bundle twice on the counter before sliding them across to her.

Virginia slipped the money quietly into her handbag.

“Will that be all for today?”

“Yes. You’ve been very helpful. Thank you.”

With that, she turned and walked quickly back toward the main entrance she’d entered through minutes before.

*Was it really possible it could be this easy?*

Only once she was outside did she feel herself once again start to relax.

She was pulled from her thoughts by the sound of honking coming from the road.

Reflexively she clutched the handbag tighter to her side as she cast a glance up the road, half expecting to see a police car.

Earl was glaring at her from the front seat of the car parked at the end of the block. He honked the horn again and held his watch up to the windscreen, tapping the face impatiently. She waved an apology and headed to the car.

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Virginia could hear the busy clatter of cutlery before she’d even wheeled her chair through the doorway. The dining hall was busy today. Not that they didn’t have a captive audience, the residents had a choice of eating in the cafeteria-style dining room or having their meals in their rooms for those who either didn’t want to or weren’t capable, of making the journey from their lodgings down the hall.

At least one resident who wouldn’t be dining in the cafeteria today was Howard Bellingham in Room 8. Virginia had been up early and watched the cleaning staff carrying cardboard boxes containing his few personal belongings from his room, at least until the duty manager had moved her along. She’d seen the unmarked white van in the driveway as well, the one which only turned up in the early hours and quietly shifted things before any of the residents rose for the day. It was probably better than scaring those who hadn’t been here long by turning up with huge a black hearse, but everybody who’d been here more than a year knew, even though it was unmarked, it was from the local funeral home. Virginia wasn’t sure why they bothered. Why was it so taboo? Why was it so difficult to broach the topic of death? Everybody here knew that they were, in one way or another, ultimately waiting until it was their turn to be collected. And then what? Eventually, management would euphemistically advertise a new vacancy like it was some kind of hotel in which the guests were just passing through. In some ways, she supposed it wasn’t far from the truth. But what if anyone asked why Howard wasn’t at lunch today? What did they expect to say? Pretend he’d had a better offer elsewhere and moved out? Again, Virginia supposed, it wasn’t far from the truth.

In any case, she’d seen today’s menu on the noticeboard by reception as she’d trundled past earlier in the morning after being hurried along from outside Room 8. Today’s lunch service was a choice of roast beef with seasonal vegetables, albeit mashed, or lasagna, on account of it being one of the residents’ birthdays. You were even allowed an accompanying glass of wine if your medication allowed it. It made a change from the usual bland fare that, no matter the ingredients, somehow always managed to smell of boiled cabbage, and she certainly wasn’t going to let the absence of one more resident spoil it for her.

Virginia wheeled her chair to one of the smaller vacant tables and proceeded to make a melodramatic show of trying to move the existing chair from its place until one of the dining staff would come and wait on her.

The dining room itself was little more than a glorified mess hall cafeteria, not dissimilar to the mass feeding facilities where she'd once partaken in school lunches, albeit this operation was somewhat slower and quieter. Nevertheless, they did still have menus placed strategically on the tables for those guests who couldn't manage the queue themselves and Virginia had figured out if she could get one of the dining staff to first help her get her chair settled at one of the tables, she could proceed to have them wait and take her order from the menu as if she was eating at a real restaurant. It was hardly fine dining, but one could at least pretend.

After the third time of loudly hitting and then backing from the chair at the table, finally one of the staff arrived.

"Let me help you with that Mrs. Westcott."

It was Susie, one of the younger members of staff, who was only on during days, unlike the real nurses. Susie was nice enough Virginia supposed, though like most of her generation, she could be somewhat unfocused.

Susie lifted the existing chair from the table and placed it by the wall near the entrance, then pushed Virginia's wheelchair in.

"There you are Mrs. Westcott, enjoy your lunch."

Susie started to retreat to the kitchen, but before she could turn Virginia deftly swiped a menu from the table with one hand and waved the departing Susie back with the other. "Aren't you going to take my order?" she asked without looking up.

"I can if you'd like, Mrs. Westcott."

"Yes please, Dear," she said, before adding, "it's very thoughtful of you to offer."

Virginia already knew she was going to order the roast beef but made a point of giving the choice of options her full consideration. It was the least she could do after Susie had offered her full attention.

"Let's see," she ran a gnarled finger down the length of the paper in her hand. "What's this?" She pointed.

Susie leaned forward, squinting over Virginia's shoulder.

"Come on Dear, it's me who's had the cataracts operation, not you."

"It's lasagna Mrs. Westcott. It's a kind of layered pasta."

"Yes, yes, I know what lasagna is, Dear. I'm old, not stupid. I meant this." Virginia pointed to the small-lettered print asterisked alongside the menu item.

"It says it's gluten-free, Mrs. Westcott."

"Gluten-free?"

"Yes. Gluten is..." Susie paused half-expecting to be berated again. "It's something in flour", she said, "some of the other residents find it can give them a bit of a tummy upset, so we give them an option without it."

"Hmmf. In my day nobody'd ever heard of such a thing as gluten. You considered yourself lucky to have bread in the first place and got on with it. We couldn't afford the luxury of being picky in my day."

"It still is your day, Mrs. Westcott." Susie extended an olive branch.

"Unlike these kids today," Virginia continued regardless. "It's just another fad. You'll see. Like this Paleo diet." She looked up at Susie for the first time in the conversation. "You don't think I know about these things either do you, Dear? I'm old enough to remember the original." She smiled, offering a brief truce.

"So, you'll have the lasagna then?"

"Roast beef please, Dear." She handed the sheet of paper to Susie, who nodded and took her opportunity to retreat to the safety of the kitchen, "and a glass of the house red, if you don't mind."

As Susie disappeared Virginia surveyed her surroundings. From her current vantage point, with her back to the window, she could take in the other residents occupying the dining hall for lunch.

At the large table on the other side of the entrance Bill and Joyce Ames were being settled in by an entourage of staff, and a small group Virginia presumed were their family.

So, it was Joyce's birthday then.

The two daughters fretted over a handful of gaudily wrapped presents, taking turns to open them while the other read out the cards from family members who couldn't be there, or more likely, sent presents instead so they didn't have to be.

"Oh, look Mum, this one's from cousin Derek," announced the older of the two.

Joyce maintained a blank stare into the middle distance of the open dining hall while the two husbands looked forlornly around the room as if trying to find an escape.

One of the nurses placed some plates down at the table and old Bill instantly got to work, busying himself shoveling down great scoops of lasagna square, seemingly unaware of the fuss going on around him.

Virginia watched the bitter-sweet farce as it played out in front of her.

What drove people to go through this ridiculous charade, pretending this was a grand family celebration, because the painfully obvious truth was this was a group of people, who, each for their own reasons, didn't want to be here in the first place. And yet here they were. Why?

Was it a sense of duty? Obligation? Because that's what you did when you had an old relative, wasn't it? Or at least, you were supposed to. Perhaps it was something deeper? Because regardless of everything horrible that comes with growing older, family is still family, and some of us carry on bound by the ties of blood and love despite everything.

Or maybe it was because Bill and Joyce were loaded.

They did occupy one of the higher-end self-contained suites, the ones that were for those who could still, notionally at least, look after themselves. Another charade, Virginia thought. Bill and Joyce couldn't look after a pet goldfish, let alone themselves.

Despite all of this, Virginia realized the thing that annoyed her most of all about the spectacle across the room, was she was jealous. Façade or not, their children were here to celebrate the occasion of their mother's birthday, even if it might be her last. Especially because it might be her last.

Virginia turned away, her eyes falling on the empty setting opposite at her own table.

When was the last time Lucy had phoned and said she would visit for lunch? When was the last time Lucy had phoned? It was her own fault she supposed.

In the beginning, it'd seemed harmless enough. Sure, she realized what she was doing was wrong, but what did it matter? No one was getting hurt. It was the perfect victimless crime. Think about what she could provide for her own child with the money. So, she said nothing, and over time the payments kept coming.

"Here's your roast beef Mrs. Westcott," Susie said, all smiles as she placed the plate down in front of her. "Do you need me to push you in?"

"I'm fine thank you, Dear."

"OK then, I'll leave you to it. Sing out if there's anything else."

"I believe there was supposed to be a glass of wine," Virginia said, but Susie had already made her escape and was halfway back to a group sitting at one of the large tables in the center of the room.

Virginia sighed and stabbed at a piece of the gravy-drenched beef on her plate. Despite being wafer thin the slice was tough as leather. She placed her knife and fork down on the plate among the dark gravy and returned to equally dark thoughts.

Lucy had only discovered the truth when Earl had died. She'd been helping clear out the things from his outside study when she'd stumbled across the bank statements. Virginia had held

the account in her own name, and she'd always been careful to dispose of the statements when they arrived.

It had been a revelation to both of them.

It meant Earl had discovered her deception years ago, but he'd never said a word. She couldn't be so sure that Lucy would do the same.

"These...these payments are for child support," Lucy had said. "But who are they for? There are at least four different lots of them here. You and Dad only ever had me."

Virginia had watched in horror, the color draining from her face as Lucy slotted the pieces of the puzzle together, clumsily at first, making haphazard guesses as to what it meant.

"You and Dad...do I have other brothers and sisters out there that I don't know about?"

"No!"

"Then, what is all...this!" She cried, waving wildly at the pages now lying scattered around her on the floor.

"Did you and Dad have miscarriages? Is that it?"

"No, it's nothing like that, I can explain."

"Then *do* I have siblings?"

"No...I don't know."

"You don't know? How can you not know something like that?"

"Look, Lucy, there's something I need to tell you."

They'd always meant to tell her of course. Not about the money, that was something which until a few moments earlier, Virginia had assumed was a secret she'd take to the grave. Did Earl ever wonder where the money came from? On her modest midwife's salary? Even if Earl did ever suspect, he'd never said anything.

The adoption had been Earl's idea in the end. He'd stood by her after the incident at the hospital. The doctor said she'd had a nervous breakdown. The doctor prescribed her some pills to take the edge off things and scheduled six months of appointments with a psychologist. As if that was going to help. Six months of talking to a stranger about something they couldn't possibly understand themselves.

But Earl understood. He'd stood faithfully beside her through it all. He'd urged her not to return to work too soon, but after the six months was up, she knew she couldn't put it off any longer. Besides which, they still needed the money, despite her somewhat less than legal supplementation. It was then that Earl had suggested it.

"Why don't we try again to have a child of our own?"

She'd protested. Hadn't they tried enough before?

"That's not what I meant," he'd said.

Even then he'd stood beside her. He could've left any time. Could have, probably should have left, and found another woman who could provide him with a family of his own.

*Why didn't he just leave?*

Even then he refused to admit it was her who had the problem.

And so, she'd decided to go along with it. It was the least she could do in return for him. She'd always assumed when the agency did their background checks, that would be when her deception would be found out. It would be a relief really. Then Earl would no doubt finally leave her behind and be free to lead a life of his own, one without the burden of her in it.

But no one ever did discover what she'd done. Even Earl, presumably not at that stage anyway.

They'd always vowed they would tell Lucy, eventually. They'd decided they would do it together. When she was sixteen. But sixteen came and went and it didn't seem like the right time. Then nothing seemed like the right time. How do you tell someone they're not who they really think they are? That you're not really who you say you are and that everything they've ever known about their family has been a lie...or at least an omission of the truth?

Sixteen became eighteen, when she was able to vote and make grown-up decisions for herself.

Eighteen became twenty-one.

What did it matter anyway? A name didn't change the fact that in their eyes she'd always been their daughter. Or at least she had been, until that day.

Virginia thought about the woman from Room fourteen down the hallway, June, she thought her name was. How she'd wander the halls of Twin Oaks, aimlessly clutching at strangers and asking if they'd seen her baby. Virginia wondered how June had lost her baby. Perhaps hers too had been offered up for adoption? Somewhere deep down the memory of another desperate young woman she'd met once stirred before being silenced and taken away from her thoughts.

What kind of desperation drove someone to give up their child? Virginia had wondered this over the years as she watched Lucy first crawl, then later take her first tentative stumbling steps across the rug that lay in her and Earl's living room. Somewhere out there, in the world beyond their little suburban bungalow, was another woman who would never know the feeling of Lucy's soft skin against her own. Never hear her desperate little cries in the dark in those precious first days, when all she needed was to be lying close to her mother, smelling her skin, listening to her heartbeat. But Virginia was her mother now. Times were different then of course, and desperate people did desperate things. When the woman from the agency had first visited them at home, she'd told them that they'd been given a great gift from another young woman who knew they could give her daughter a better life. How could she know that? As if she and Earl had somehow been more deserving of Lucy than her birth mother. Many times over the years since, Virginia had wondered how different all their lives would have been if she and Earl had been able to conceive naturally. It's strange how karma chooses to manifest itself. Either way, they'd both lost a child now, Virginia and the other woman, a woman she'd never met, but whom she'd felt bound to by an unbearable debt.

"Is this seat taken?"

Virginia was jolted from her thoughts by the man now leaning, one hand on an ornate walking stick with the gold head of a lion, the other on the back of the chair on the other side of her table.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I was thinking about something."

"So, it would seem," he replied. "Given I've been standing here all of about thirty seconds already, without even the slightest reaction. I was beginning to think you were another of those like Mrs. Addaway." He waved the cane pointing across the dining hall to a slouched figure, staring blankly into the bowl of soup in front of her.

"I meant to say, I intended to dine alone."

"A pretty woman like yourself should never be left to dine alone."

"Pretty? I see your eyesight is going as well as your mind. I'm a seventy-six-year-old woman, my days of being a beauty queen are long in the past."

"I'm sorry," he said, "I only meant it as a compliment, but in any case, as you can see, the dining hall is somewhat busy today on account of it being Mrs. Ames's birthday, and it seems you have a rare spare setting at your table, so perhaps we might both just have to make the best of the situation."

Before she could protest further, he'd pulled the chair aside, sat, and laid the cane down beside him.

"The name's Eddie, by the way, Eddie Malone," he said, extending a hand across the table.

Virginia declined the outstretched hand. "I know who you are Mr. Malone," she replied, "you're in Room 17, ground floor, South wing. As far as I'm aware," she continued, "you don't

usually have visitors, so I assume you either don't have any close family, or at least no one local, and from the little of what I've overheard from the staff you're generally considered difficult to deal with."

"My reputation precedes me it seems, for you to apparently know so much about me already."

"Mr. Malone, I've been residing in this so-called assisted living facility for nearly 9 months now, and as they rather delicately describe the situation, until I check out, I'm the current occupant of Room 21."

"Ah, that explains it then, we're practically neighbors."

"So, it seems."

"I'm sorry," Eddie said, "about before, when I sat down. I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm not offended. I said I was no longer pretty, but that doesn't mean I see myself any differently today than any other day of my life. At our time of life, one comes to realize there's more to it than the superficiality of one's appearance, especially to impress men. Do you know what I see when I look in the mirror? I see an old woman staring back at me from beyond the glass, I'm not deluded, but that doesn't bother me, because that's not what it's all about. We all grow old. It's a fact of nature beyond our control, the sooner we accept that the better. I see stretch marks, wrinkles, the scars, and they each have their own story to tell. They're reminders of the road I have traveled to get to this point in time, and of what I have achieved. They are who I am, and they remind me that I am more empowered by them. That's real beauty."

Virginia returned her attention to her lunch.

Eddie picked up the menu and perused his options. "So, what does one have to do to get some service here?" He asked. "I see you're eating already. Any recommendations?"

"It's hardly the Ritz," Virginia replied, "though apparently, the lasagna isn't too bad," she added, softening a little. "As for getting service, good luck with that."

"I see." Eddie scanned the room, before seeing Susie still attending one of the other larger tables. He waved in her direction, finally catching her attention.

"Mr. Malone, we don't often see you in the dining room."

"No, that's true," he conceded, "I do tend to keep to myself these days, but then again, perhaps it's never too late to make a change."

"Good for you," Susie said. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Yes, I'd like to try the lasagna please, and I see we're allowed a drop of vino with lunch today?"

"Yes, Mr. Malone."

"In that case, a glass of red will do nicely." He looked across at Virginia's empty glass. "And one for my companion Mrs. Westcott here. It's on me," he smiled.

Susie grabbed a bottle from a nearby trolley and tipped the remaining contents into Eddie's glass. "I'll be back," she said, before scribbling something down on a notepad and making her way back toward the kitchen.

"You didn't have to do that," Virginia said, "I ordered a drink before you arrived."

"Did you drink it already?" Eddie asked.

"Of course not. They clearly forgot it."

"That, or they were hoping you didn't notice."

"Oh please, I've not lost all my marbles quite yet."

"That's not what I was implying, but I wouldn't put it past them to be so stingy. Besides, it probably wouldn't do their reputation any good to have a bunch of drunk out-of-control octogenarians on their hands."

Virginia laughed at the image. "Well, thank you anyway, Mr. Malone."

"Please, call me Eddie."

"Eddie," she said, "And how did you know I'd ordered red?"

“I know a lot about the people here,” Eddie replied. “But in this case, put it down to an educated guess. You’re eating roast beef, so I assumed red would go best.”

“Well, thank you,” she repeated. “It’s nice to be treated like an adult for a change, even if the people it’s for are none the wiser.” She pointed across to the birthday celebration table where even the two daughters seemed to be losing their enthusiasm. Joyce was still staring blankly into the center of the room, meanwhile, Bill had by now moved on to dessert. “They don’t know how lucky they are,” Virginia grumbled.

“What do you mean?” asked Eddie.

“I mean literally, they don’t know how lucky they are. Do you think she even realizes all this is for her?”

Eddie started to turn to get a better look at what was going on at the birthday table behind him.

“Don’t look!” Virginia chided him. “It’ll be obvious.”

“But I thought you just said they were oblivious.”

“Maybe they are, but there’s still no need to gawp is there?”

Eddie took a sip from his glass before settling it back on the table. He absent-mindedly brushed his napkin off the table, then leaned over to pick it up again. As he did so he took in what was going on at the celebration table.

“As for that Bill,” Virginia continued, “you’d think he hadn’t seen food before.”

“In a way he hasn’t,” Eddie replied.

“What?”

“Before they came here, I believe they used to live in a small two-story apartment. Bill isn’t as non-compos mentis as you think. In fact, he’s quite mentally capable. It’s just his body that’s shot. So, for the last six months or so at home he was pretty much confined to their bedroom upstairs. Joyce on the other hand, she’s the opposite. Her body’s as strong as an ox.”

“But her mind isn’t?”

“The lift hasn’t stopped at all the floors for some time. Imagine it, he’s stuck upstairs bedridden, but perfectly sound of mind...”

“While she’s wandering about hopelessly confused.”

“Exactly. So, seeing as she’s always the one who’s prepared the meals, he calls out wanting his dinner, meanwhile, she cooks the meal, forgets she hasn’t given it to him, then later on, scrapes the cold food into the rubbish bin wondering why he hasn’t eaten it. Went on for nearly six months before one of the children found him half starving to death. That’s how they ended up here. So, you can hardly blame the poor fellow if now whenever he gets served food, he doesn’t want to make small talk, can you? He just wants to eat while he can in case he doesn’t get fed again.”

At that moment Susie arrived with Eddie’s helping of lasagna and topped up Virginia’s glass with red wine. When she’d departed again Virginia leaned closer over the table.

“How do you know all this?”

“I’ve been around a little while myself, and when there’s not much else to do you learn to observe those around you. You pick up things. Their habits...like the way Mrs. Caversham always walks twice clockwise around the garden every day at ten. You get to learn people’s deepest darkest secrets.”

There was something in the way he said this last thing, the way he stressed the deepest and darkest, that gave Virginia a shiver.

“Like what secrets?”

“Like how an hour before dinnertime Henry Cooke always has a slice of hard cheese with a nip of whisky his grandson brought him, which he isn’t supposed to have.”

“Oh, that’s not so bad,” Virginia replied, oddly relieved that this was all he meant.

“Isn’t it? You’d be surprised though; what skeletons are hiding in the closets in this place.”

"I very much doubt anyone gets to our age Mr. Malone without having one or two skeletons in the closet, as you put it. We've built up a lifetime of decisions made. I'm sure we all have one or two regrets." She took a sip from her wine.

Eddie leaned back in his chair and briefly stroked the coarse white stubble on his chin. "Yes, I suppose that's one way you could look at it," he said, "though some are worse than others. Take Ralf Catalano for example." He nodded to a slightly stooped figure making his way toward the self-serve buffet table. He leaned the tray he was carrying against the table and ladled some soup into a small bowl. "Rumor has it he was once in the mob you know?"

"I gave up long ago listening to rumors, Mr. Malone." Virginia scoffed. "And you should too. Poor Ralf couldn't hurt a fly, let alone be a mobster."

The man at the buffet table turned and carried his tray in trembling hands back to his seat.

"Ah, but how can you be so sure, Virginia? How do you know he wasn't responsible for ordering the cut-throat execution of his rivals?"

Virginia laughed. "Well, all I can say is you have a very active imagination, Mr. Malone. If Ralf was a gangland boss, either he wasn't a very good one, or he's fallen on hard times to end up here, don't you think?"

"Hmmm. Perhaps."

"Let me put it another way, what makes you so sure he is...was...a gangster?"

"Because I have...sources."

"Sources?"

"Yes, I guess you could say I have friends in high places."

"At our age, you're lucky to have friends at all."

Eddie laughed, a short bitter sound, more like a reactive expulsion of air that held little or no actual joy. Perhaps she'd hit a nerve, Virginia reflected.

"And tell me Mr. Malone, do you have any skeletons in your closet?"

"Please, call me Eddie."

"Very well, Eddie."

"As a matter of fact, I do, he said, lowering his voice. In fact, last night I received a phone call."

"From your source?"

"Yes, as it happens."

"And who, may I ask, is this person who shares with you the deepest darkest secrets of your fellow residents? Is your mystery informant among us now?" She glanced around the room.

Eddie shook his head. "Not exactly." He pointed a finger in the direction of the ceiling.

"You mean," Virginia paused. "They've died? Good God, it wasn't Howard Bellingham, was it?"

"No! It's not someone from here. In fact, you were closer to the point with your initial reaction".

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean?" She nodded toward the ceiling where Eddie's finger had been pointing. "Who is this 'source' you're talking to then?"

Eddie checked that no one else was listening to their conversation, before conspiratorially leaning in close across the table, shielding their conversation behind one of the menus.

"God," he said simply.

"God?"

"Yes."

"Last night, I received a message from God. Well actually, he called me on the telephone."

Virginia started to giggle. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought I heard you say you had a telephone call from God."

“I did.”

Virginia dabbed with her napkin at tears forming at the corner of her eyes. “Oh Mr. Malone,” she said, “it appears I was right the first time; you do indeed have a good imagination.”

“But it’s true.”

“Oh, please stop,” she said, trying to contain herself. “And what, pray tell, did your friend, Holy or otherwise, have to say about me then, hmmm?”

“He said your daughter hasn’t visited you since you’ve been living here.”

Virginia stopped giggling. “Nice try Mr. Malone, but that sort of vague generalization could apply to half the people in this room,” she said, making a wide sweeping gesture with her arm. “And I don’t think it’s a particularly nice thing for you to point out.”

“That’s certainly not my intention, but you did ask. I’m just relaying what I received.”

“In that case, I’d rather you kept your thoughts to yourself.”

A stillness fell between them as if a curtain had been drawn across the middle of the table and for a time neither of them spoke until Virginia eventually broke the silence.

“Do you have any family, Mr. Malone?”

Eddie sighed.

“I didn’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because if you had, you’d know what it means to have children.”

“And that is?”

Virginia folded her napkin and placed it on the table between them. She looked over Eddie’s shoulder to the drama of the birthday party playing out in front of her. “It’s strange how things come around to a complete cycle. The roles we play. It’s as if we all sit at the table, our places around it changing like the world’s longest game of musical chairs. When you begin, you’re the child and the whole world revolves around you. Then you leave home and start a life of your own, and for a while, you set the table yourself. You meet someone, there’s another place to set, and it’s suddenly like you were never apart. But when children of your own come, it changes everything.

When they’re young, they are helpless, completely dependent on you for nurturing and survival. You are their sun, their everything. Equally, you can’t imagine a life without them. Every waking moment is occupied trying to love and protect them. Keep them safe. But the world you spend so long trying to create and make perfect for them is never more than one step away from collapse, with you losing everything you’ve ever worked for.

Then we shift places at the table again. They’re gone, an empty seat is all that remains and it’s as if they never really existed in the first place outside of our own memories.”

Virginia’s eyes were looking in the direction of the birthday party beyond Eddie’s shoulders, but in her mind, she was seeing a different scene entirely, a montage of first steps, first words, first days at school.

When she’d become a mother, even though her child had been adopted, she’d joined a mothers’ group that would meet once a week for coffee. They were there to support each other, and yet Virginia always felt like an outsider, like it was a special club, one in which she’d cheated on her membership and never quite belonged. As the children grew, so too the group slowly drifted apart. At first, one or two dropped off the weekly catchups. Then the catchups themselves became fortnightly, then monthly, then not at all. She kept in touch with one or two, but she still felt the invisible barrier of birth between them. She’d last crossed paths with one of the mothers from the group when Lucy had turned eighteen. Virginia had been shopping for the birthday party at the local supermarket when she’d bumped into the woman in the party supplies aisle.

“Isn’t it wonderful!” The woman exclaimed. “Now the children have grown up and we can get our own lives back!”

Virginia smiled and agreed, but the truth was she'd never felt that way. For eighteen years Lucy had been her life. She'd never felt like she'd placed her life on hold, and now she'd supposedly gotten it back, she didn't know what to do with it. All she had now was a gaping emptiness where something had once lived. It was like something had been physically removed from her body.

Even Earl had grown quiet and distant.

It was as if somehow, without the joint demands of raising a child between them, they'd forgotten who the other person was, or how little outside of Lucy they had in common.

At the birthday table, one of the serving staff had begun clearing the pile of discarded wrapping paper from the table and squashing it into a cardboard box occupying the chair at the end of the table.

Why is it, Virginia thought, that some memories lay so close beside us that you could almost reach out and touch them, while others were so easily and quietly pushed aside and squashed into their own box? Could it be that one day the collected memories of her own lifetime might be equally unceremoniously packed away?

She sighed, turning to face Eddie Malone in the seat across from her. "More than anything else I always wanted a family of my own but you only come to realize in a place like this, where the days can drag but the years fly by, that family really was the most important thing of all."

Eddie turned briefly, following her gaze to the table behind his shoulder and then back again. "Perhaps they're the lucky ones after all," he said.

"You call that lucky?"

"What do you think you'll leave behind for people to remember your life by?" He asked as if reading her thoughts. "In a few years, all of us will be gone, and I don't just mean dead. We'll be buried alongside our loved ones and all that will remain to show we ever existed will be a headstone or a plaque with our names on it. Who do you think will still know the stories behind a few short lines written in stone? How quickly will it all be forgotten? Our children will remember us, sure. Perhaps even our grandchildren. Maybe, if we're lucky we'll become a photograph on the desk or walls of our great-grandchildren, but tell me, how much do you even know of your great-grandparents? I don't just mean their special achievements. I mean who they were, their personalities? Do you think we really know them? So, within what, two to three generations who will remember us? What if everything we've ever lived for is fruitless? Maybe the ones in here with dementia have simply forgotten themselves before everyone else has."

"If you're trying to cheer me up Mr. Malone you're not succeeding."

"My point is, all we own is this moment, the one we're living in right now, so you might as well enjoy it."

Eddie took a sip of wine and placed the glass in front of him back on the table before wiping his lips with his napkin. In front of him, Virginia Westcott was gazing into the distance, perhaps observing something only she could see. A single tear glistened at the corner of her eye.

It was Eddie who broke the silence this time.

"It must've been a hell of a shock finding out that way."

"I beg your pardon?" Virginia responded, returning to the room as if surprised to see that he was still there.

"Your daughter, I can see why she felt she couldn't forgive you."

"What?"

"She's pregnant, you know?"

"Who's pregnant?"

"You're daughter, Lucy."

"How did you...?"

“Don’t worry. She will. Forgive you that is. Eventually. Family changes these things you know, especially now she has a daughter of her own on the way.”

“How do you know this?”

“I told you. I had a phone call last night from God.”

“I don’t know how you found this out Mr. Malone, but I think you should go.”

Eddie placed his napkin on the table in front of him. “Very well,” he said, pushing his chair out. “But don’t shoot the messenger.”

He reached for the walking stick where he’d left it nestled between the table and the wall and stood. He took two steps toward the entrance to the dining hall before he stopped and turned. “She will come around. She’s already forgiven you for the money, the rest will just be a matter of time. But” Eddie waved an accusing finger in her direction, “It’d be a shame if you weren’t here to see it.”

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Eddie couldn’t sleep. Again. Growing old was a bitch. You felt tired all the time during the day. Your legs ached with a tiredness that seemed to seep into your very bones after something as simple as walking down the hall, then as soon as you lay down in bed you were wide awake. Insomnia meant existing in some kind of purgatory, always halfway between being fully awake and being asleep, but never quite able to achieve either. And it was hot. Again. It was always hot in here. Eddie had read somewhere that you lost the thin layer of fat beneath the surface of your skin as you grew older, leaving the familiar crepe texture of the elderly and making you cold.

If only.

Perhaps in his case, it was one of the few concessions to age to which his body had not yet surrendered.

The nursing home staff kept the temperature and humidity inside at a constant tropical level year-round so that inside there were no seasons. Supposedly this was because of those elderly residents who could no longer maintain a steady body temperature and otherwise wandered the corridors in thick woolen sweaters in the middle of summer. Ironically, it occurred to Eddie, that the stifling indoor temperature and high humidity made the perfect breeding ground for God knows how many different kinds of germs. It was no wonder the nursing staff were always washing their hands.

Lying on top of the sheets staring into the gloom he felt another familiar pang of age in his bladder. He tried to think of something else to distract his attention, but he knew it was no use. He wouldn’t have a hope of even trying to get back to sleep until he got up and went to the bathroom for the second time that night. *Another design flaw of the aging human form*, he thought, as he shuffled his way to the little ensuite toilet. It felt like a lifetime he’d spent in this body, and sometimes it seemed to him that regardless of what age he’d been, there’d always been something leaking out of it. Perhaps it was something he’d take up with God the next time he spoke with him. He was sure he would speak with him again, sooner or later, one way or another.

When he’d finished with the bathroom he didn’t bother returning to bed. Instead, he pulled out the chair and sat at his small desk. He opened the curtain a crack and stared out at the little rose garden outside his window, the roses slowly nodding to each other in the moonlight. After several minutes, sure enough, the telephone rang. Eddie picked it up on the first ring.

“Hello?” He said tentatively, but he already knew who it would be. Eddie didn’t like what he’d been told last time.

“Why me?” He protested. Why not someone else, and why now? Eddie had never liked being told what to do.

“But I’ve already done everything you asked of me,” he offered, but by now he’d run out of both reasons to counter what he was being told, as well as energy to resist.

Eddie listened in silence for the remainder of the conversation as he received the instructions. When it was at last over, he placed the receiver back in its cradle and shuffled back to bed.

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## The Priest's Tale

It was on days like this that Patrick Donnelly found himself occasionally questioning his beliefs. Not so much faith itself, but more the specificity of it. He believed in God and that there must be some sort of afterlife, he was a priest after all, but at times like this, he wondered what the meaning of it all was. Not that this was a new feeling, he knew he wasn't having a crisis of faith, at least, not as such. He'd always had moments like this. When he was a young boy, he'd snuck into his father's study one evening where he'd found an old leather-bound copy of Aristotle's *De Anima*, which he'd smuggled back to his bedroom, where over the course of several weeks he'd stay up late in the night, reading by torchlight beneath the blankets.

In the book, Aristotle tried to understand the soul, hoping to define its essential nature and properties, a task he described as 'one of the most difficult things in the world'. Young Patrick couldn't have agreed more. He became fascinated by the world of the ancient Greek philosophers. Plato, Aristotle, Socrates. Here was a group of men challenging society's assumptions, asking the ultimate questions about everything, existence, reason, knowledge, values, mind, and language. Something in these fundamental questions struck a chord inside him. What was the point in life after all if it had no meaning? What was God's grand plan, when so much of life seemed so futile?

For a long time, Patrick had assumed he'd become a philosopher himself. One day he was reading a copy of Plato's *Charmides*. Like so many of the other works of philosophy he'd by now read, it covered topics of justice, temperance, wisdom, truth, and beauty. Then it dawned on him, that these weren't merely questions thrown out by a curious mind seeking answers. These were an open invitation – a hall pass that gave the bearer license to stick your nose into just about everything. Up until that point, he'd spent his time reading the questions of the great thinkers and pondering what he thought himself. This struck him as somewhat arrogant. Who was he, after all, to compare his thoughts and ideas of the greatest thinkers of the ancient world? But what if he asked other people?

So he did.

It turned out, when you scratched the surface, when you went beyond the platitudes of casual conversation, there seemed to be a great many people in the small town where he lived who were struggling with finding meaning and purpose in their lives...and a great deal more besides. Once someone admitted they felt fed up with the humdrum of their daily existence, that there had to be something more in their lives to live for, well, it seemed they would tell him just about anything at all. People freely shared with him their hopes, dreams, and fears. All he had to do was listen. But his newfound trust came with a growing sense of responsibility. Some of the people he'd been talking with offered up their deepest darkest secrets. Up until this point, he'd simply asked others the same questions he'd had and listened while they shared their own experiences. What if now they were looking to him to provide them with more in return? What if they were asking him to provide the answers? In an attempt to unburden himself of this feeling, he'd shared this one day during confession at his local church.

"Have you considered joining the seminary yourself?" Father McGuire had said from the other side of the gauze window of the confessional booth.

"I beg your pardon, Father?" He'd replied, somewhat in surprise, "but that's not at all something I could even contemplate."

"I don't see why not. It seems to me young Patrick, that what you're doing is helping people to question the meaning in their lives, then by listening, you're guiding them to find the

direction for themselves. Does that not sound too dissimilar to what I'm doing with you right here, right now?"

"But you aren't just listening to my concerns Father, you provide spiritual advice and reassurance."

"And how is my reassurance any different to that which these people receive by talking to you?"

"Well, you have experience."

"Is that so? In that case, tell me Patrick, why is it that married couples in our parish come to me, a celibate priest, with no intimate relationship other than to God, for marital advice?"

"But you have the experience of your theological study, and you have the authority of the church."

"All I do is enable them to see things that were already in front of them in the first place. As for the rest, with a little guidance, you could learn easily enough so that instead of questioning, you could be teaching. Instead of seeking knowledge and reassurance, you would be sharing it. There's really not that much difference."

And with that Patrick's path had been set.

He turned the little car that belonged to the parish into the entranceway and proceeded up the long drive to the rest home. He did this trip every Sunday after the main mass at the Sisters of the Missions, providing holy communion to those elder members of the parish who could no longer attend in person, though in recent years the numbers had dwindled. On his last few visits, it had just been him and Ms. Worthington.

He drove quietly past the main entrance and the visitors' and relatives' carpark to the lot at the back of the main building, the one usually reserved for trades and deliveries. As he pulled around the corner he saw the old black hearse from the local funeral director's parked outside the rear entrance. Another resident it seemed had been called to God overnight.

As he got out of the car he saw the flashy late-model SUV emblazoned with the Pentecostal flame of the local gospel church. Patrick walked across the carpark to the rear entrance of the home. That's when he saw Pastor Fredrick standing in the doorway alongside Mr. Woodhouse the funeral director.

The funeral director nodded in his direction. "Father Donnelly." He said quietly, acknowledging his arrival.

"Patrick!" Pastor Fredrick boomed. He extended a fleshy ring-encrusted hand from his tailored suit. "Nice of you to join us, but I'm afraid you're a little late and a tad misinformed." He nodded in the direction of the hearse. "One of ours I'm afraid."

"So I see."

"How's business in your neck of the woods then?"

"Business, as you put it, is fine, thank you."

"Then what brings you here today?"

"I'm here to provide holy communion to those of my elder parishioners who can't attend mass."

"Parishioners? Don't you just mean that Ms. Worthington?" He nudged the funeral director. "Now there's a woman even God is scared to meet."

"We're all different in our spirituality Frederick, not everyone feels the need to share their faith with the same exuberance as you. Especially in their eighties. Ms. Worthington takes her faith very seriously."

"All I'm saying is it wouldn't hurt even her to smile once in a while. Think about it. Perhaps if your lot made things a bit more upbeat you'd have a bigger flock to tend to Patrick."

“Faith isn’t a competition in popularity Frederick, or a business proposition.” He looked toward the hearse. “In any case, it would seem that your congregation would seem to be getting smaller.” He turned to the funeral director. “Do you mind me asking the name of the deceased?”

“As I said Father,” Pastor Frederick interjected, “one of ours, you needn’t worry yourself, we’ll take care of it.”

“I wasn’t worried...”

“Virginia Westcott,” the funeral director replied.

“Mrs. Westcott was one of yours?” Patrick said. “I wouldn’t have exactly picked her as the type.”

“What exactly does that mean? What type?” Pastor Fredrick’s face was starting to flush.

“Well, it’s just she’s you know...quiet.”

“It takes all kinds, Patrick.”

“Well, yes, but...”

“Anyway, she only converted recently. Such a generous woman too. She bequeathed quite a sum to the church.”

“Is that so?”

“Anyway, as much as I’d love to stay and chat, we’d best be off. Doesn’t do to be hanging around places like this with a hearse, does it? Bad for business, if you know what I mean. Makes the residents feel uncomfortable. You understand.”

“Yes...but, what do mean Mrs. Westcott recently...”

But before he could finish Pastor Frederick was already halfway across the carpark, waving a dismissive hand behind him. “Sorry Father, can’t stop now, clients to see.”

Patrick turned to the funeral director, who was just shaking his head, before he too turned, closed the rear double door of the hearse, and mumbled a quick goodbye.

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Patrick pushed open the rear entrance to the rest home and proceeded along the short corridor which led to a small non-denomination chapel. He made his way between the three rows of chairs, all of which sat empty, to the small lectern at the front of the room, where he began to set up what he needed to dispense the holy communion. When he turned around again a lone figure dressed in black was seated in the front row, her head was bowed staring down at the floor while gently counting off from a string of rosary beads in her right hand. Mary Worthington. Right on time, as expected. She must have seen him arrive and followed him into the little prayer room. He waited for a short time while she proceeded through her prayers, before interrupting.

“Ahem,” he started. “Let us begin.”

Ms. Worthington stopped her prayers and made a sign of the cross toward the little statue of Mary he’d placed at the front of the room.

“Do you not want to wait for any others, Father?”

Patrick looked along the rows of empty chairs behind her.

“I think we’re probably safe to start Mary,” he said. “It looks like it’s just going to be you and me. Again.”

He offered a prayer before proceeding with a brief homily for the elderly. “God responds to us as we age,” he said. “God never forgets us. He wants us to stay close to him in prayer from our hearts. He reminds us that the Lord is with us always. God is both generous and loving. As we grow older and look back upon our lives, we can see his hand at work and all the blessings he has provided us along the way. Amen.”

“Amen,” Mary responded.

Patrick filled a small glass of communion wine. Not that it was really wine at all. Ms. Worthington had asked him when he'd first arrived if he could provide a non-alcoholic alternative for the Eucharist.

"Alcohol is a filthy habit," she'd remonstrated. "Addiction is a horrible sin Father, one which we are forever condemned to witness surrounding us because we live in a fallen world where people are wounded through sin's influence and enslaved by sin's control. Does it not say in Peter 2:19 'You are a slave to whatever controls you', Father?"

He placed the symbolic wine along with the eucharistic bread on the table at the front of the room. "I now offer the sacrament of the Eucharist."

Instead of the usual invitation at the parish mass, where members of the congregation would come forward to receive communion, Patrick joined Ms. Worthington in the front row of chairs and broke the bread alongside her. With the formalities of the service concluded the two of them sat sharing a moment of quiet reflection.

"Father," Ms. Worthington ventured, "can I take the opportunity while you're here, to hear my confession?"

"Yes, of course, Mary. If that's what you'd like."

"Do you think this is a safe place to do so, Father?"

Patrick looked around the empty room. "I think we'll be fine," he replied.

"Forgive me, Father," she started, "it's been two months since my last confession."

"What is it you'd like to confess, Mary?"

"Oh, it's not for me, Father."

"Oh...then on whose behalf is it you're wanting to confess?"

"Are you aware that one of the residents, Mrs. Virginia Westcott, recently departed this earth, Father? God rest her soul."

Patrick thought of his recent exchange with Pastor Frederick in the rest home's carpark. "Yes," he replied, "I was aware, but why do you feel the need to confess on her behalf?"

"You're aware that she wasn't a Catholic Father?"

"Not being a Catholic isn't a sin Mary, at least not the last time I checked."

"But there's something not right about the whole affair, Father."

"What do you mean?"

"You know she had a visit a few weeks back from that flashy Pentecostal lot, Father. Converted her. Practically signed her up on the spot."

"Well, that's a matter between Mrs. Westcott and her faith Ms. Worthington, that's really none of our concern."

"But it's not right, Father. You know she has a daughter?"

"No, I didn't know that. But I'm sure she will be quite capable of settling matters of her late mother's estate."

"What about her eternal soul, Father? Are you not concerned that she should be condemned to spend the rest of eternity in hell for following false prophets? Does Matthew 7:15 not say 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves'?"

"Mary, these days the church has a far more forgiving view of these matters. There is no longer the judgment of those who are misled by others, and there is certainly no more condemnation to an eternity in hell. As Luke says 'Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven.'"

"It's still not right, Father."

"As that may be, Mary, I'm sure Mrs. Westcott's daughter will deal with her church."

Ms. Worthington glanced over her shoulder to the door at the back of the room, then she leaned closer and lowered her voice. "It's no coincidence Father, mark my words."

"Mary, are you suggesting...Mrs Westcott was the victim of foul play?"

"Oh, there was foul play all right."

“By the Pentecostal church?”

“Not just them, Father, there’s all sorts of goings on happening in this place.”

“Such as?”

“Well, there’s that Eddie Malone for starters.”

“Eddie who?”

“Malone, Father. I tell you, something is going on there. He’s not what he seems to be, I tell you. You know he was seen talking with her just yesterday, next thing she’s being carried away in the back of a hearse.”

By now Patrick had an idea the conversation was being driven more by the state of his elderly parishioner’s mind than by reality. He tried to steer the conversation back to a resolution without appearing to not take her concerns seriously.

“This Mr Malone, did he seem particularly agitated at the time?”

“Well, no Father, he didn’t.”

“Well, there you are. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for what you think you’ve seen, Mary.”

“Well, where does that leave me then, Father?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve witnessed things. That’s why I’ve felt compelled to say something to you now. If I don’t, that makes me as good as complicit, doesn’t it? Is there anything you can do to absolve me of my sins?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing, Mary,” he said, “but if it makes you feel better, say three Hail Marys, and the Lord shall absolve you of your sins.”

“Only three Father?”

“Okay, four. To be on the safe side.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“You’re welcome, Mary. Go in peace.”

“I will Father, thank you.”

Ms. Worthington slowly rose from her chair and Patrick watched until she’d left the room before letting out a long sigh. He sank back in the chair and placed his head in his hands.

When he’d joined the priesthood after those early long discussions with Father McGuire he’d always assumed there’d be more to it than this. What was he doing here? Some days it felt like he was doing little more than providing reassurance and platitudes on trivial things to the likes of the Ms. Worthington’s of the world. In a world left bereft of spiritual meaning people looked to him to provide guidance and purpose to their lives, but how could he when he no longer felt it in his own? What hope did he have convincing someone in their twilight years if they hadn’t already worked it out for themselves by now? For most of his life, he’d assumed there had to be something more, some deeper purpose to it all. But as he’d gotten older, he began to wonder whether this was in fact all there was. What if there really wasn’t anything more? What if the complexity and meaning he’d assumed to be there all along, wasn’t? What if life really was as simple and superficial as it appeared on the surface, and this was all there was to it? What if we’d all just been sold a lie? If that was the case, then it was one in which he too, was complicit. Unwittingly peddling the false promise of everlasting salvation. Was he just another snake oil salesman?

He raised his head and stared at the plastic figure of the Mother Mary he’d placed on the stage at the front of the little chapel. Of course, he recognized what was happening here. It wasn’t the first time in his life he’d had a crisis of faith. Why did he feel like this more and more? Surely it should be enough that he was doing the Lord’s work? He was doing good in the world and giving others peace. Why was that no longer enough? He sat and prayed silently to the plastic virgin to show him a sign he was still on the right path, but she steadfastly refused to answer.

No visions.

No crying statues.

Not today.

Even the faux plastic candles refused to flicker. He sighed, not so much in disappointment, as resignation. What evidence did he think he needed? Other people accepted things at face value every day. When a store puts a price on the goods we buy each day, we take their word that the price is reasonable. We trust that the people who say they are our parents are indeed our parents. The only people who would think otherwise could be reasonably assumed to be out of their minds.

Perhaps he was losing his?

Patrick stood and walked to the stage at the front of the room. He collected the faux candles and switched them off at their bases. God cannot be coerced into existence, Patrick reminded himself. God reveals himself in his own time. It's up to us how we respond when he does so.

Patrick picked up plastic Mary and tucked her away back in the cupboard where she'd come from.

"See you again next week," he whispered to her before closing the door, locking it, and walking away.

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