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Take This Bread

Jeri Schelhaas

Dordt College

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Take This Bread

by Jerelyn Schelhaas

Herm's ninety-two and sits alone most days, the television's blaring, his two hearing aids and the radio tuned somehow to the same broadcaster bring in the rise and fall of the Cubs or the Twins or the Tigers or occasionally the ducks and the antelope on the Disney channel.

Each morning at 5:00 he makes a whole pot of coffee, drinks three cups by 9:30, throws away the rest by noon.

His last fishing buddy died this summer and he never got to the funeral because it was raining and he has no children of his own.

But he has a friend—next door in the low rent complex. A woman.

When Dixie moved in four years ago, he put an extra lock on the door. Dixie had a reputation from way back. A married woman with several children, she had entertained the local banker for many years and gossip said he had not been the only one.

No matter Herm was eighty-eight at the time. His maleness, he was sure, would throw off her sense of direction, and since their doors were side by side, she might some night find her way into the wrong unit. Inexperienced in fighting off women, he believed the only sure way to prevent an attack was a new lock. "They shouldn't let people like that in here," Herm had told one of the other residents one morning in the laundry room.

Dixie has a dog and a cat, neither allowed in the housing complex, so she pays considerably more rent. Rather that, she says, than live alone.

Dixie has blonde hair—dyed blonde, a heart problem which demands she walk a mile three times a day, and a taste for clanky jewelry, bright colors and wind chimes.

Wind chimes is about the only thing Dixie has in common with Herm's deceased wife, Dora. That, and the heart problem that took Dora's life nine years ago.

Maybe it was the heart thing that broke the ice. But more likely it was mutual need. Dixie's door bell wouldn't quit ringing one morning. Herm fixed it when she banged on his door in desperation. Once when her dog got awful stomach cramps from the gravy Dixie insists he needs, Herm—always a gentle hand with animals—quieted the dog and rubbed his stomach calm. Half the pies and cookies Dixie likes to bake end up in Herm's apartment.

It was slow, most likely, but a friendship has grown between the two, a dependency. Dixie walks past Herm's window every morning to check whether he's awake and in his chair. Herm checks for bugs in Dixie's hanging flower baskets in summer, shovels snow in front of their side by side doors in winter. There is also a gentleness of mutual concern in their way toward one another, a looking after each other in spite of the wall that separates their apartments.

It took three years for the church Herm was going to notice that he was not driving out to church regularly anymore, that maybe at ninety-two he no longer could. So now every other month the minister comes to bring communion in a little wooden case, especially made for shut-ins. Herm likes this almost better. He has always loved the intricacy of small design—in a fishing reel, the workings of a

clock, in paint-by-number scenes. The velvet lined box, the little silver bottle and small, clear cup, a piece of bread wrapped in linen intrigue him. And he can hear the minister better as he reads the "Form for Communion."

An adulterous woman lives next door to Herm; he eats her pies and cookies; he tends her flowers when she neglects them; she comes into his home, he into hers. He has never asked her if she's sorry for her sin. In fact, he never thinks about it anymore. He leaves his door unlocked. And before the minister returns to bring communion, she will have checked whether he's up and in his chair every morning for two months.