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Homebody

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Homebody

by Jerelyn Schelhaas

Every year Mom suggested I visit her old friend, Edith. Until this summer I never did.

For twenty years I had put it off—a series of forty or so selfish decisions, on those forty or so visits from Illinois to Iowa back to my folks' farm. I could have stopped in, a quarter mile up the road. I knew she was always home, each year bending more and more to accommodate the arthritis that collapsed her body like a melting styrofoam cup.

Mom had said at least once a year, "Anne, you really should go to see Edith." And in the last years she had added, "but you'll be shocked."

"Why shocked?"

"She's just a little tiny thing anymore—all hunched over. You'd never know her. And she's no older than I am."

"I'll try," I had said but knew I wouldn't. My folks were old too and needed our visit and the time was always too short.

Besides Mom always kept us busy—eating—three big meals plus nine a.m. coffee and three p.m. tea and pots and pans to show for it all. Not to forget "splitting a beer" just before noon, reminiscent of the days when Dad and my brother Eddie came home from the field thirsty first and hungry second, and we would eat watermelon before dinner.

But this time, this summer after Dad's shaking was diagnosed as Parkinson's and Mom turned eighty, she seemed more insistent about the visit to Edith. I thought her insistence might have to do with how we all seemed to be putting periods on the sentences of the family's life. We did a lot of things—in case. In case it was the last time for all of us to sit in the swing and hear the wren's serenade, or shoot golf balls toward the corn crib, or ride the motor bike Dad could no longer ride but couldn't part with, or play "Annie, Annie Over" over the barn with the kids while Mom and Dad watched from lawn chairs under shade trees.

On this summer visit I made sure to see a few things—just in case. We drove past the "old place" where Dad grew up, the grove, still there, where Uncle Pete had been killed by a falling, icy tree branch, the place where Marv Staal had lived—Dad's friend, killed in the war "way too young," a third generation German immigrant killing and killed by distant cousins. We picked another bouquet of irises on the "other place" and looked once more into the unused silo to scare the pigeons and make them beat their wings madly to escape fifty feet up through the open top.

We told a lot of the old stories again too. Like the time Dad marched in the Hanford Daze Parade wearing Jeanette Mulford's dress and shoes—she was

the only woman we knew big enough and game enough to lend Dad her clothes—and leading a tame pig on a leash. And like the story about the man who told Mom at their fiftieth class reunion that he always thought she had such beautiful legs. Mom had liked that one.

We hadn't said exactly when we were going to leave again for home. We just kept doing things and finding things to talk about. That was my fault mostly. I was always the last one to leave no matter where we were—talking outside church or at a piano recital or visiting friends. Toward the end of the week my husband said, "It's time we get back. You'll never get this good-bye said. You have trouble saying goodbye to . . . anybody. People you've known only a year—an evening. You just gotta leave. Sunday is it."

"It's never easy to leave."

"You'll just have to do it."

"Okay. Sunday. We should clean their attic yet though. That's got to be done sometime anyway—now or later."

"Sunday. You tell 'em."

* * * * *

"You gonna try to see Edith before you leave?" Mom kept repeating through the week.

She explained, "Edith has three shifts of help now. There's a big one there for the night shift. Maxine somebody. I think she's from Joling. We went last week one night. Lyle Deters says Edith spends over a thousand dollars a month on those three women. That one at night looks like she just sits and eats."

"It's a lot more expensive to go to a home, Mom. People lose everything to pay for a nursing home. How does that sound to you?"

"I know. But at least there they have to furnish you with board and room. This is just care Edith's paying for."

"But would you want to live there? In a home? Forget the cost."

"No, I wouldn't. But Dad and I always said we don't want to burden you or Eddie either. And then there's Edith's way. But I wouldn't want that big one taking care of me. Anyway you should go see her. She really looks . . . old . . . bad She's my age you know."

* * * * *

The big one opened the door.

I knew Edith would be sitting in the living room. Mom said they had a hospital bed in there for her, but she sat in a chair most days. I hesitated to round the corner that would bring me directly into her vision and she into mine. I had not seen her for twenty years and guilt alone kept me from feeling at ease in this long-delayed meeting.

But it wasn't only guilt. Mom had said I wouldn't recognize her—the arthritis had crippled her so much that her face was contorted and she was, according to mother, “skin and bone.” I was afraid to have Edith see my shock as I saw her.

Maxine led the way and once her big body stepped out of the way, I saw Edith. A little bird-like woman, her head barely above the back of the chair. There seemed to be no body—just her head resting on her lap and two thin legs, one foot bent sideways, unshod, individual toes bound in what looked like lamb's wool. Her hair was white, her eyes bulging slightly because of the contortion of her face. Only half of her mouth opened as she said, “Anne, I needed this visit.”

Her hands were clasped awkwardly on her lap and she sat perfectly still as if any movement would bring her pain.

I felt like she was sizing me up too, a grown woman for whom life had gone smoothly, whose children were doing well, whose husband was successful, but who had neglected her, shriveling year after year, like an apple forgotten in the back of the refrigerator, for twenty years, living alone a quarter of a mile from my own mom.

“Hi, Edith.”

I tried to look right into her eyes to stop myself from gawking at her twisted frame, to overcome the shame I felt for my neglect.

“Is this a good chair to sit in?” I asked the stupid question of Edith since Maxine had left for the kitchen. I envisioned Maxine sitting down to a mid-evening snack of ice cream and strawberries. I had eaten strawberries in that kitchen too.

“It's been such a long time. It's good to see you.” I meant those words, but I really wanted to say, it's terrible, just terrible to see you sit there balled up like tinfoil, moving only your eyes and searching to connect me to the teenager who used to stay overnight here with your daughter.

“How are you, Edith?” My direct questions were appreciated by my friend the therapist who said I often gave people an opening to bare their souls, but this one sounded more like a get well card to a person with terminal cancer. Couldn't I see how she was—confined in pain to a nursing home of her own making?

“Some days better than others.”

“How's Laura?” I asked. Laura was her daughter, my friend from high school days I had lost touch with.

“She's fine. She was just here last week. Long enough to say hello and good-bye. How's Anne?” She asked me.

I could have acted as though I was not there and answered the question in the third person but chose to say, “I'm Anne. I'm fine. And Lois? How . . . how many children does she have by now? I forget.”

“Three children. Two girls and a boy. Laura and Lois and Tim.” Those were her own children's names.

Maybe the speed of the questions confused her. We were in no hurry.

* * * * *

A half hour later we had gone through the list of “How is” questions which, when covered, indicate the conversation is over. Most of the time she knew what was going on.

In the half hour, she told me my dad was one of her favorite people—which, I knew, had nothing to do with affairs or dependent friendship, but just that he was an enjoyable man to have stop by, caring, funny, sympathetic. She reminded me of the week I stayed there when my folks traveled to Yellowstone. I reminded her of the time I babysat Lois, seven years younger than I, and, Edith, knowing I wouldn’t accept payment, had taped lilacs and five dollars in an envelope to the gear shift of my car and locked her door and turned off the light before I could object and bring the money back—She remembered that.

But I didn’t tell her we were responsible long ago for the death of her cat, Pretty Kitty, who Eddie shot one morning thinking it was a stray Tom killing our kittens. I hadn’t told her Laura and I had skipped school one day to shop for prom dresses and that Laura had done that more than once.

I didn’t tell her I couldn’t believe she could still be alive in a body like hers.

And I didn’t say her sweet spirit escaped that body in her gentle way of forming questions and in her eyes the cortisone and arthritis had not dimmed. I should have told her that.

And she didn’t say, “Where were you for twenty years and why are you here now?”

That’s what I asked myself.

When she called for Maxine to turn on the TV, I knew it was time to go.

“I need a hug,” she said.

She could not stand up and hug me, so I bent and hugged her—very gently: her body was so frail it felt like a fragile wire dressform waiting to be clothed. Except for her warm cheek, there was so little left in that body to respond. But her cheek was warm, warm enough to soften my twenty-year-old tears. And from somewhere—from her skin or from memory—I caught the sweet smell of “Chantilly Lace.” As I stood up, I glanced to see if there were tears in her eyes too. There were not. She didn’t look at me again and seemed absorbed in “Perfect Strangers” as Maxine walked me to the door.

I drove home to Mother—young at eighty—her wrinkled skin camouflaging a body that still cooked three big meals a day and loved it, cleaned her own windows, and alone dug up enough space for six tomato plants from which she would most likely can twelve quarts.

She met me at the door. “What’d you think?”

Over the evening and in various ways I said:

“She looks bad. What a pity. What a terrible life she has.

“I didn’t know I had missed her.

“What a louse I was for letting twenty years go by and never bothering to drive a quarter mile to see her.”

The twenty years are gone now like top soil blown away in twenty Iowa spring wind, loose, without form, only occasionally collected on some front window or car hood or smooth body of a young girl running loose-limbed in the sun.

All night I said these things.

But what I wanted to say and Mom wanted to hear couldn't be said. But we both knew.

“Oh, Mama, you are not like Edith. You're whole. There are years left. I'll grab your nimble hands and we'll dance in circles, slim feet shod in silver slippers, heads thrown back, soft giggles slipping from our souls.”

Sunday my husband and I took the kids home.