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STRANGERS WELCOME

Right when I got the news that Alvin had died, I told Max that I wasn't going back to Birmingham for the funeral. I am not a hypocrite. My younger sister JoAnne is the one who called, blubbering the whole time, and her unashamed display of grief put me off further as she spun the details of his passing. I sat up in bed, with the phone's earpiece squashed between my left ear and collarbone, and with Max's head, buoyed by pillows, touching the small of my back. I turned the lamp on, which I never do, because I wanted to be certain that I was not dreaming. Max is my husband of forty-two years, and he has shared my displeasure of Alvin Hubbard since our childhoods together. But when he heard my little yelp of glee once the reality of Alvin's demise had sunk in, he cautioned me to maintain cordiality with JoAnne—and also to go. This he did—right after I had told her *no*—by stroking my back gently with his good arm; when I turned around to kiss him on the forehead, the right side of his face—the side that still functioned—was animate with displeasure, the way a baby's face minces when food tastes too sour.

“Oo shuh go,” he said in a whisper that could not have been heard by JoAnne.

Apparently waiting for me to change my mind, JoAnne added, “Petie will be there. And Helen will so want to see you! Please?”

Helen is Alvin's second wife, who no doubt is consumed by grief, and with whom I get along fairly well. Petie is our younger sister, who has suffered more calamitously than either

JoAnne or I, but who carries in her big heart the soldier-on spirit of the Confederacy, and is a kind of adventuress, having learned to pilot a plane in her sixties!

Max's urging shrank to a simple "Go."

I must remember to tell JoAnne how delicious her blueberry pancakes are.

Anyway, once I had reluctantly agreed, there was no stopping JoAnne. "Katherine, can you believe it? He was only seventy-four!" For JoAnne, who had been a lifelong optimist and—not coincidentally—an admirer of Alvin's, seventy-four is young. She is seventy-three herself. I am only four years older, but I don't think it's optimistic to think of seventy-anything as young; it's just foolishness. I'm hoping to go on to the century mark myself, but the fact of it is, we are old. *Houses* crumble after seventy-five years.

JoAnne says I am a pessimist because I am the older sister. It's true I've always felt older, and wiser, than JoAnne. I also figured out Alvin's game early on, though there was nothing I could do about it. Most of us grow up considering the consequences of our actions, pausing to reflect upon ethical considerations, like might this or that act result in harm, or have an unhappy consequence for another person. While we're all pausing and reflecting—that's when people like Alvin step in. Over and over again, Alvin just, well, acted, and built up a kind of momentum; admired as much for that—misdiagnosed as determination!—as for his actual deeds. Only death can stop someone like that.

"It seems only yesterday we were all in high school together," said JoAnne, while I wondered how soon I could hang up on her. I looked over at Max's face, whose right side had returned to a relaxed state. He had fallen back asleep. Raindrops began pelting our bedroom windows, and mercifully provided a needed distraction. "There was Alvin, and you, and me, and Max, and Charlie, and Petie."

Petie's seventy now. Petie and Charlie were once beaux, starting in grade school, even though Charlie was three years older, JoAnne's age. Me and Max were an item since the summer between ninth and tenth grade, when he first kissed me. Max was brainy, with no athletic ability—unlike all the other boys I had dated—but he was reckless, and would try anything. He was the only one to take up Alvin's dare to climb the eighty-foot tall water tower behind Charlie's house. Before he started the climb, he told me that he wasn't scared because he knew he could do his life's work even if he was paralyzed in a fall. This seemed to me a terribly romantic notion, which I enhanced by saying, *You can't do your life's work if you're killed*. He said, laughing, *Well, then it wouldn't matter, would it?* I said *it would to me, Max Stewart*. He grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed me. That pretty much did me in, though at the time it didn't feel sexual, just powerful. After ten years or so of wondering why I wasn't falling in love with any of the real good-looking, sexy men who kept throwing themselves at my feet, I married Max. I was grateful he was still around.

I do not remember how I managed to end the conversation with JoAnne, but I know that if I don't push this plate away, I will explode. That's how good these pancakes are. Now, where was I? Oh yes.

This morning I am going, as they say, to pay my final respects—not the right word for it—and I feel compelled to review my feelings toward Alvin, rather than ignore them as I have for so many years.

All through high school Alvin and JoAnne dated. Alvin told everyone he figured he'd marry JoAnne. JoAnne, though secretly pleased at Alvin's single-minded pursuit of her, kept her options open, which was wise because once he had gone off to college up north (*Traitor!* said my father) at the University of Massachusetts, she did not see him again for five years, until just

after he'd enlisted in the Air Force. He was by then engaged to a girl he'd met in New York City, who was from Boston, named Arlene Adams, and who was a millionairess.

As things worked out, JoAnne ended up marrying Charlie, and Petie, bless her heart, never found anyone to replace him. Her standards were high, and still are. Petie and Charlie figured out they were too much like brother and sister. That was Petie's explanation. I think, however, that JoAnne turned twenty-three the year Alvin and Arlene were married, and she threw herself at Charlie—pursuing him the summer between Petie's junior and senior year of college, when she was off in the Colorado Rockies helping to restore the Continental Divide alongside other young idealists—with a single-mindedness she must have picked up from Alvin. I know for a fact that she got him in bed and more or less tore the hinges from their mountings, as they say, and just like that Charlie and Petie were history.

JoAnne had a good life with Charlie. They had twenty-eight years together. She never regretted letting Alvin slip away, till Charlie died at age fifty-three. Now that's young. Too young for such a wonderful man to die. Charlie's parents were still alive, and I believe that's the only thing that kept JoAnne from pursuing Alvin after Alvin's first wife died.

I consistently told JoAnne how unfair it was she should have Charlie taken from her and that scoundrel Alvin should live on. But she has been more a Bible person than me all along, and has forgiven everyone their trespasses—just as Petie did her for stealing Charlie!—every Sunday for all her adult life. She is like my husband Max in that regard: they love everyone in the way we Christians are supposed to. I suppose you could say I love everyone in that limp style, too, but it doesn't count for anything. It's like saying you love nature, and where's that get you?

Soon as Max is better, we'll fix up our kitchen and create a breakfast nook like JoAnne's here—with its dark oak-paneled walls and soft red velvet cushions, and brass sconces spraying

their gentle lights up and out like Japanese fans. It reminds me of the one in the house we grew up in. Blueberry pancakes, and everything else, just taste better in a cozy nook like this.

Anyway, JoAnne followed up her call with a short note attached to Alvin's obituary, cut out neatly from the local paper. The article contained a picture of Alvin in his fifties; from civic leaders there were quotes of glowing praise, honoring his many accomplishments, such as leading a tunnel escape as a POW in World War II Germany. Even God himself would've forgiven Alvin a trespass or two after that, I suppose. He founded a successful bank. He was remembered for his two marriages, the second begun a respectable year after Arlene had died—of cancer no less. He had five children total. He ran unsuccessfully for mayor, but followed that failure—a mere misstep to his admirers—with a successful tenure as Republican county board chairman.

The article did not mention that he cheated at cards, and golf, and on his first wife Arlene, whom I both despised and pitied. As surely as any drunk who depends on the bottle, she had depended on him, despite her wealth, and his philandering increased her dependency. Naturally, I blamed him for her weakness. She was an educated woman—a lawyer—but she had the common sense of a lemming, and like a racehorse caught in the fire of his heroic post-World War Two image, she ran into the flames rather than from them. Alvin was overall a mean, selfish man, opportunistic and overbearing as a boy, a manipulator and boor as an adult.

But my opinion is the minority, certainly among the women of our hometown, who uniformly judged him handsome and witty, charming and well-mannered. Soon enough I will be dead, too, and so will my opinion of Alvin Hubbard—which I am telling you is more the truth than what you've read or whatever his supporters, or JoAnne, might opine—and thereafter history will retain only the nicer assessments of Alvin's life, like a sieve that lets all the sand and dirty water through, leaving only flakes of gold.

For those many years I lived in Birmingham, until Max's job took us to Portland, I simply ignored Alvin, as my way of saying: *I am not fooled like all the others. You can't sucker me with your smooth talk like you suckered my sister.* Twenty years ago, at an event honoring one of Charlie's inventions (he invented several medical and dental tools), an inebriated Alvin pulled Max and me aside at the pre-dinner cocktail party, and tried to convince Max that he had spurned my advances, along with JoAnne's, right after college, before he'd gone off to war and at a time he was engaged to Arlene—when in fact it had been the other way around.

Max and I shrugged this off. But Arlene caught wind of the comment and confronted me. This was before she got cancer, but she was already looking tired. I told her the truth straightaway, as I had no reason to sweet-talk her. Lo and behold, she spilled her guts to me. I was right, and she knew it. But she hadn't the backbone to leave him. She mistook my pity for sympathy, and claimed thereafter that we were friends. As a result, I was invited to many ladies-only luncheons and parties, which by and large I attended. I was not above trying to solicit from these wealthy women some business for Max, who had started an ad agency. Arlene saw each visit as a sign of our strengthening friendship. I did not discourage her in this perception. One time Dorothy Babbitt spoke to her husband Roger, who ran the Buffalo Rock Beverage Company, and as a result Max was invited to make a presentation and got a portion of the account. So I networked, as they say, like a good wife should.

I spoke often enough with Arlene to know she was unhappy in the extreme. But depression never overtook her, which is my explanation for her cancer. If his betrayals were a slap in the face, she never flinched. She was from a rather stoic New England family, not as expressive as the people I was used to. I found her brand of stoicism off-putting. If she could've brought herself to hate Alvin, I just might have grown to like her.

Alvin's second wife, Helen, a mere twenty-seven to his fifty-two when they married, was a knockout. You couldn't hate her: she was a *nurse*! You couldn't pity her: she had a body too perfect for a man to resist. Their marriage lasted twenty-two years, and this time I don't believe he was unfaithful—how could he have improved on her?

He had entered public life a year after Arlene's death, and was considered one of the most eligible widowers in Birmingham, whereas my sister JoAnne was considered too old to remarry at 53, after Charlie died. Alvin was admired for his restraint in not remarrying too quickly. It took him a year to wed Helen, and after they'd been seen in public, the admiration grew and shifted to his deft selection of such a beautiful, sensitive woman. *She's a nurse, too!* was the syrupy homage most often heard. As she became first his wife and secondly, as it turned out, campaign manager, Alvin shifted from his banking business to politics as easily as he hopped from bed to bed during his first marriage.

I am up early, but JoAnne has already been in the kitchen and left me these delicious blueberry pancakes, which I must remember to tell her I just *love*. When we were kids she'd beat me to breakfast, too. She was a nervous child who slept deeply, but moved as if she were struggling to find a comfortable position. She often fell out of bed, but would climb back in after waking up the rest of the house, and plunge back into unconsciousness as if nothing had happened. For several years, until I was ten, we slept together. I complained to my mother bitterly that I was being deprived of sleep—I would occasionally report to breakfast with bruises—to no avail.

"How's Max?" asks JoAnne, returning to the breakfast nook from wherever she was, setting down a glass of fresh-squeezed O.J. lined up opposite my plate. Her fingers tap gently against the rim of the glass.

"He's walking," I say cheerfully. Two months after the stroke that nearly killed him, my Max still struggles to speak. He can mumble, and looking at his eyes you can tell if he's happy or frightened. Mostly he is frightened.

"Who's taking care of him while you're here?"

"My son Peter, but there's not too much to do. He's taking care of himself okay," I lie. "Speech is a little slurred."

"He's so young to have had a stroke," says JoAnne. I resist the temptation to respond.

Today is the funeral. There will be a church service, during which several of Alvin's friends and family members will speak. Then they will lay him in the ground. Not next to his first wife, mind you; she is buried in Natick, Massachusetts with her family. What's that tell you?

No, Alvin'll be put to rest in his own hole, surrounded by empty plots which have been designated for his second wife and all his children and their wives and husbands. One thing I could say positive about the man—he planned well in advance. Of course, so did Hitler.

"Why such a sour look, sis?" says JoAnne.

"You'd think a face could wear any look it pleased the day of a funeral," I say.

"You're the one who's glad he's dead, darlin'. I thought you'd be giddy all day."

"I know it's wrong, JoAnne, but I'm thinking of myself today. Deep thoughts."

She gives me a smarmy look, like I've just told her to bug off, which I guess I have. I am supposed to forgive Alvin his trespasses today, if never before or after, but I cannot. I will not. God'll forgive him, if there is a God. I am holding onto my hatred like a child grips a toy she thinks everyone will try to take away. You can't have it. It's mine.

Last night I spoke to Max. He tried to get a few words out—I could hear him say, "I'm trying" which came out "Ine rying", and I broke down and sobbed.

"Don't cry, Mom," my son Peter said, taking back the phone. "I'm right here with him and he's lookin' great. You can't be worrying about us now you're down there. How is everybody down there, anyway? Is it crazy?"

"No more'n normal. I'm the only one livin' in the real world, if that's what you mean." My tears had vanished.

"Aunt Petie sweet as ever?"

"Sweeter. Goodbye now. I love you."

I heard a faint "I yuv oo" followed by Peter's "I love you too, Mom," and I hung up.

I cried again for a bit before JoAnne came in, and we talked about the good old days till I got my equilibrium back.

With my sister JoAnne across from me in the breakfast nook this morning, I am reflecting on how my dislike of Alvin as a young man grew naturally like weeds in a garden—JoAnne's metaphor—"putting all the pretty flowers at risk." I am not a garden person like JoAnne, but I do know that weeds have deeper roots than most plants, and just pullin' at 'em won't do the trick. "You have to dig down to get the roots," she'd remind me periodically thru the years, hoping to elevate me with her manicured wisdom. Thank goodness she has let me be this trip. My thoughts shift to how Alvin operated just like the devil, who wooed you till you fell for him. I let my antipathy for Alvin grow untended for decades, while the evidence of his philandering and lying mounted up.

First I heard he'd cheated on Arlene was when the younger of her two children was just six months old. I told Max about it and he said without hesitation he'd heard, second-hand, that Arlene had cheated on Alvin first.

"When?" I asked. "When would that've been?"

"Don't know," said Max. I was working up a little hate on Max for even bringing it up.

"Couldn't a been the last year, could it?"

"Coulda been," said Max. "Coulda been earlier."

"Max," I told him—I had a bowl of spaghetti I was bringing to the dining table—
"Arlene's been blown up like a balloon since she was three months with her second, and she hasn't lost much of it since her daughter was born. Who's likely to've been sleeping with her the last year if not her husband?"

"I heard they *haven't* been sleeping together."

"And whose fault is that?" I said.

"She ought to try to lose some of that weight."

"Max Crabbe!" I shouted. "It's public knowledge Alvin Hubbard's been shacking up with Deborah Cheswick on and off at the Pandora. You're going to tell me it's Arlene's fault? Based on two stories—more'n likely false—that contradict one another?"

"I'm just keeping an open mind, Katherine. Alvin's given her a good home. Two healthy kids—knock on wood. She's lucky to have him."

I dropped the bowl of spaghetti on the table. I didn't expect it to crack open, but it did. "The spaghetti incident" is how my family remembers it. It's got kind of an aura around it thirty years later. Most folks think I dumped the bowl in Max's lap. We laugh about it now. It took Max a while, but the sheer repetitiveness of Alvin's infidelities finally took hold, and Max could see Arlene looking tired and sad all the time. Still, the woman smiled and got the color back into her when we said hello, exchanging pleasantries and stories of our respective children. But I could see the cancer—or something—coming.

JoAnne gushes as we climb into the car. We are to pick up Petie en route to the church. This'll be the first time all three of us have been together since Charlie died.

"All girls, and all beautiful," says JoAnne, referring to Alvin's children, which I have inquired about, having ignored the fact that he even *had* children by his second wife. JoAnne backs us up out of the driveway at breakneck speed, so fast that when she turns onto Magnolia, I am thrown against the passenger side door.

"JoAnne," I say finally, adjusting my hat, "you drive temperately or I swear I will leave this car and duck the funeral entirely!" JoAnne has always been a little reckless behind the wheel, and yet she's never had an accident. This fact alone may account for her optimism.

"I'd a thought Alvin'd be blessed with all boys, wouldn't you, Katherine?" says JoAnne.

I had to admit, as much of a testosterone machine as Alvin Hubbard was, I'd expected each pregnancy to've brought him a little Alvin Junior. God works in mysterious ways. Or not at all, is my feeling.

Petie is my youngest sister, and looks it, which suggests to me that things worked out right with her and Charlie and JoAnne. Marriage might've roughened and wrinkled her. Spinsterhood has resulted in a youthful vigor that shames the rest of us. She ran her umpteenth 5K last year at age sixty-nine! It was more of a walk, but she looked the part in the photographs, arms swinging fore and aft like an athlete.

"Hi, Petie, hi, hi, hi!" I say to her, as is our custom—repeating the "hi's" or "hello's" or whatever—as she enters the car, settling into the back and spreading her arms as if she were in a limo and we were her drivers. She was the only one of us who, in her youth, seemed to have any Southern belle tendencies.

"Hiya, Katherine, hiya, hiya!" she says back, smiling and leaning forward to give me a kiss and a hug. Since she was little, she's been a hugger. "My, but don't y'all look marvelous. When's it been... since Charlie died? My oh my, Katherine, you look happy, too!"

"I can't imagine how that works, Petie," I said. "You know Max had that—"

"Of course I do. You got my letter, didn't you?"

"Yes I did," I say, which was true. I had received the letter, which included a whole part to Max, which I read to him, and to which he responded, "I uv oo 'itta," which I took to mean, "I love your sister." I tell Petie this, and she smiles.

All the way to the church she smiles beatifically—looking every bit the Southern belle despite wearing black—as JoAnne reminds me who lives where and for how long, who's still alive and who's not. She recounts the time in junior high when me, Max, Charlie, a friend of Charlie's named Bobo, and JoAnne—I don't remember where Petie was—when the homecoming parade tied up Grassee Boulevard and we had to ride our bikes south to Greenleaf and cross Highway 16 where there were two big stop signs, hung high, impossible to ignore, facing east and westbound travelers on the highway.

Bobo was hit by a car as he pedaled across the intersection, and was thrown high into the air. We all watched in amazement as he flipped once and landed on his rear side a few feet into the grassy divider strip. He got up immediately and said, "Holy cow!" and ran over to his bike, which was as bent as a paper clip. Several adult witnesses collared the culprit while we were all going, "Wow, did you see that?"

The police arrived pronto and whisked Bobo off to the E.R. We rode our bikes over there to meet him. All he suffered were bruises. Several bruises—and a bike you could've hung in a museum as an example of modern sculpture.

"After that," says JoAnne demurely, "I never figured anybody I knew personally could die. The truth didn't really take hold until Charlie."

Petie had been a nurse during World War II, stationed in Miami. For two years she watched as young men she knew went off to war and died, or were wounded, then convalesced for a while in Miami, only to die there later, never to see their homes again. I believe this

experience helped her to handle all the crises that have fallen upon her. She helped JoAnne cope with Charlie's death by ignoring her own experiences with death and allowing JoAnne to grieve slowly, lengthily, so that coming out of her grief, she remained the steadfast optimist.

Logic would've dictated that Petie herself be angry: angry that she never knew Charlie as well as JoAnne got to. I believed Charlie's death was more traumatic for her for never having had the life with him she could've had. But logic has never been an impediment for Petie—that's one of the marks of a Southern belle, and one of her greatest strengths, so you can't ever really use it against her. After JoAnne stole Charlie's love, I think Petie just put a cork in her emotional bottle. But instead of bursting like I thought they would sometime in her twenties, Petie's deepest feelings seemed to do a slow fizz, till there wasn't any bubble to 'em at all, just a quiet intensity, a determination to do good things. Petie is the best of us, no doubt.

The steeple of St. Andrews spikes the trees ahead of us. We pull in the parking lot, too fast. The driveway has a speed bump in it, and I hit my head on the ceiling.

"Dammit, JoAnne!" I say, giving her a little slap on the shoulder.

"We're here!" says Petie, smiling, as if we'd arrived at a church bake-off.

"Sorry, sis," says JoAnne politely to me while I rub my head. "But we did make excellent time."

I notice the parking lot is jammed.

"What? Are we late?" I ask.

"Alvin had a lot of friends," says JoAnne.

"And enemies," says Petie, smiling at me.

JoAnne creates a parking space by putting three wheels on the church lawn. She and Petie get out of the car first. "You two go ahead," I urge them, swatting them away with my hands.

I stare at St. Andrews Lutheran. At the sign on the corner of Babson and Green: *Pastor David Beckmeyer welcomes you every Sunday at 9. This week's sermon: Greed - It's Not Just About Money. Strangers welcome.* At the base of the sign, reedy weeds have choked out or replaced the broad array of flowers I remember used to bloom there. I was prepared for an onslaught of manicured beauty—the word of God manifested in nature—so I am buoyed by this small sign of imperfection. Still, I feel like a stranger, though this church has been here for over a hundred years and I was no stranger to it for the first eighteen years of my life. My sisters have remained loyal to the faith, however, while I, as they say, have wandered. Not just from St. Andrews, but from churches in general.

I stand before the doors.

I am going to witness the funeral of a man I've spited for over sixty years. I have no homage to pay him; typically, only good things are said about the deceased at funerals. Officially, that is. What am I to do?

"Katherine!" comes a voice in a loud whisper. "Katherine!" A hand reaches out to me and I am pulled into a pew. I must have walked dazedly halfway up the aisle towards the casket, for I find myself sitting next to Petie and JoAnne near the middle of the pews.

Pastor Beckmeyer begins, acknowledging as he does that several late arrivals might be more accommodating if they remained at the rear, and found seats during a lull in the proceedings. He begins by stating the obvious. Alvin was a pillar of the community, a lifelong resident, he had touched so many lives, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

I look across the aisle toward the front, and spy Helen—at least I see the back of her head—and her three girls. Alvin's two girls by his first wife are conspicuously absent. You could always recognize Helen by the swan-length curve of her elegant neck, shown off by pulling her hair up in a bun like a dancer's. Periodically she turns around to catch a glimpse of

the gathered. She's not looking for or at anyone in particular; her eyes scan the rows of guests the way I eat an ear of corn: across, down, across, down, across. She is counting heads.

"—and to bless us with his guiding spirit, his devotion to church and family, his tireless efforts to improve conditions for the poor, the disadvantaged—" the pastor drones on.

Soon enough, her children turn around and mimic her movements. They are more animated in their reaction to what they see, causing me and half the people in the first few rows to turn around and look. The back of the church is now stuffed to the gills all across the wall, several people deep. The pews, as well, are full.

I turn back around, and am drawn to the various icons around the room. Luther, the Holy Family, Jesus on the cross: they are all looking at me. I feel hot, and conspicuous. *You are the only one*, they seem to be saying, as if I were a Judas, a traitor to the basic tenet of forgiveness. Had I been more a believer, more a churchgoer, could I have overcome my anger? I didn't nourish it, or seek it; nor did I reject it. It was simply the result of my experience.

As several of Alvin's closest business friends continue with anecdotes gathered over the years, I am recollecting the time our teenage church group—which included Alvin and my sisters, among others—was called upon to help a fellow parishioner.

Word had come to our group after services one Sunday that Maggie Thorsten, a very rich widow, had had a stroke, *and* a heart attack. She was expected to die soon and wished to do so comfortably at home, so she was removed from the hospital for what everyone assumed would be a few days lingering, at most. Could we, asked the Volunteers Club chairperson, take turns caring for her, feeding her, and so on? Her husband had died ten years prior, she had no family, save an elderly sister who lived in Hawaii, and was herself an invalid. *Of course*, we replied unanimously.

The seven of us worked out a schedule, and our vigil began that very evening. Alvin had begged to go first, as the next morning, a Monday, his much-coveted summer job at Westhouse Book Binding was to begin, with excellent hourly and opportunity for overtime. We were already jealous that within a couple months, Alvin might earn the equivalent of a year's college tuition. So when Alvin whined that it might be his *only* opportunity to *do good*, we let him take Sunday evening.

I came to relieve Alvin at eight the next morning; he opened the front door a scoche—and refused me entry into Maggie Thorsten's house. He braced his shoulder against the door, and I couldn't move it. He said she was *in a kind of state*, and hadn't slept all night, that she was delirious, in and out of reality, and had taken to calling him *Lewis*, the name of her late husband. Alvin insisted that *changing the guard*, as he put it, would just add to her confusion.

I offered to stay out of the way, in another room even, if only I could help. I told him I thought he must be awfully tired too, and he wouldn't want to fall asleep *at a critical time, would he?* which I thought was a decent argument for making a change. I reminded him about the summer job he was supposed to start later that morning, but he said that *if she was going to die, that it would be better for her to die happy, and not confused*, which might happen if a stranger were added to the mix. I opined as to how he—Alvin Hubbard—was a stranger to her only a few hours ago. I should *pass word on to the others*, he said, and he closed the door. I knocked and pleaded, and I'm sure I disturbed the neighborhood with my hollering: *Alvin Hubbard, how dare you hog Maggie Thorsten's dying days!* I was livid. The scent of night-blooming jasmine filled my nostrils as I drew deep breaths between outbursts. Over and over I screamed: *Alvin Hubbard, how dare you hog Maggie Thorsten's dying days!*

We complained, of course, to Pastor Lewis Beckmeyer—Pastor David's father!—whose solution was to have the rest of our group take turns fetching things for Alvin and Maggie

Thorsten—food and toiletries and such. *Such small things were good works made of*, he reminded us. Pastor Lewis entered the house on Wednesday, but it was just he and Alvin for a couple of hours, and we found out later the visit was so she could change her will, which required an adult witness. She died the following Sunday. At the church service, Alvin told our group that it had taken him several hours after he'd fed her dinner, the dinner *I had made*, to realize she had stopped breathing.

Word got out among churchgoers, that her will cited several charities to share the bulk of her estate, and that Alvin T. Hubbard was to be gifted \$30,000 towards his college education, —which back then practically covered all four years—for *devotion to his Christian duty*, in the form of stipends to be administered through the church. Not only that but the Westhouse Book Binding job waited for him and even paid him for the week he had spent at Maggie Thorsten's bedside.

Someone taps me on the shoulder and I realize I have been daydreaming again. This is so common to me now as to be unsurprising. I will slip in and out of the present, completely unaware of my surroundings. Old people are often said to be "losing it" when this happens. I rather think I am finding it.

JoAnne finally gets my attention with a hard tap and the three of us enter the center aisle and mount the stairs to the casket. It appears we are at the end of a long line, but soon others have lined up behind us, and suddenly I am hunched over the casket like all the others before me.

My sisters lean in close. They might be whispering to the corpse. I do not lean in. I stare at the body, the waxy and unlubricated skin, thick with powdery makeup. His eyes are closed and his mouth is set in a wry grin that's not quite a smile.

You can't fool me, Alvin Hubbard, I say to myself. That smile doesn't work on me. I am not one of your loyal fans. From what I hear, you've done right by Helen, but that doesn't make up for Arlene or any of the others.

I can feel JoAnne tugging at my arm. Petie is saying something, but I can't hear her.

I blame you for her cancer. I blame you for breaking JoAnne's heart, who then had to go and marry Charlie, which broke Petie's heart. You were selfish and hurtful—

Now Petie is tugging at my other sleeve. They are pulling me away from the casket. I must've spent too long; there's a crowd of people behind me, congesting the stairs leading to the altar.

"Did I take too long?" I say to Petie as we near our pew.

"Shhh..." she whispers as we pass our seats. The crowd at the rear of the church parts for us.

"Aren't we going to sit down again? Is it over?" I aim this question at JoAnne, who is behind me, nudging me forward, but her head is facing backwards. I wait for it to turn round, and when it does, there is a look of horror upon it, as if she had witnessed an automobile accident—like the face she wore when Bobo was knocked sky-high off his bike after homecoming.

We exit the vestibule, and I try to stop, but JoAnne keeps pushing me towards the parking lot.

"JoAnne, stop it!" I say, standing my ground.

"You stop it!" she shouts. It hurts my ears.

"Stop what?"

"How dare you!" she says. There is real anger in her voice. "We live here, for God's sake! How dare you bring your sanctimonious holier-than-thou attitude into our church, into our lives!"

"What did I do?" I appeal to Petie. She is as shy and silent as ever.

JoAnne has turned away, throwing her hands to the sides. They flap twice like bird's wings. "She has flipped her lid, Lord, is all I can think. She's not a bad person. All of us have those sorts of thoughts, thoughts we mostly keep to ourselves."

Petie looks sad. She takes hold of my hand.

"You don't know what you did, do you?" she says politely as JoAnne walks in front of us towards the car.

"Seems clear I must've done something wrong."

JoAnne is waiting by the car, holding the left side rear door open. I feel like I'm being arrested. She says, "We go to St. Andrews every Sunday, Katherine. We see all those people every week, in the supermarket, at picnics and parties."

Finally it dawns on me that all the hateful thoughts of Alvin Hubbard I'd had locked up inside me had actually got out. I'd spoken them so that everyone could hear.

"How am I going to face my friends?" says JoAnne as I duck into the back seat, followed by Petie, who never lets go of my hand.

"Now don't go driving reckless just because you're angry with me," I tell JoAnne. I'm pretty sure this is the right thing to say.

In a few hours I will be on a flight home to Max, where I will settle into the routine of feeding and clothing and bathing him, talking to him constantly, which is good therapy for stroke victims. They need the interaction. He will probably never get over the slur, but I do not believe the doctors when they say he hasn't long to live, or else I would never have left him to come to Birmingham. I will take care of Max. It's not a burden. I've got nothing better to do, and if I'm invited to another funeral, it's as like I won't go.

"What am I going to tell them?" says JoAnne, teary-eyed, as we ride slowly over the speed bump. We are not going to the cemetery, I'm sure of that.

There was something I was supposed to remember to tell JoAnne to make her feel good, but I have forgotten what.

Instead, I say firmly, "Tell 'em your sister has lost her mind, honey." I know what's right. I am closer to the truth than any of them. "Tell 'em she's just plumb lost her mind."