

ASSISTED LIVING

Summer was dead hot on the Carolina coast, humidity something to be reckoned with. According to Laura's late husband, Colby, it was the only place in the world you could go out at six a.m. and two minutes later be covered with sweat without moving a muscle. This was when they came every summer – "obligation, not vacation," Colby noted – to see Laura's grandmother. Colby said the soil was nothing but beach sand and the only way to grow grass was to put in sprinklers to douse every inch of yard. Grass would die off anyplace the water didn't hit. Bare spots everywhere. A challenge to grow a lawn.

Colby had never liked the heat. They'd lived mostly in the mountains, and it was a steep, icy road that killed him. When Laura moved south it was because her grandmother was dead and the land was entirely flat. It was late spring, already hot. After two weeks she wondered what the hell she'd been thinking, but by then she was out of money and it was too late.

At that time of year the scent of magnolias was sweet as a caress, an antidote to a stark life. She got a job as a receptionist at Pine Grove Assisted Living. It seemed right to seek work in a place with death hanging all over it. She was having trouble getting a grip.

Her first week at the reception desk, a tiny Cshaped woman wandered up from one of the residence wings and said, "Somebody call a cab, please. My family seems to have left." The

woman's tone held equal measures New York breeding, confusion, and terror. What was a New Yorker doing here? The town didn't have bus service, much less a taxi. Laura had no training for this.

"Yes, of course. Sit down."

Obediently, the woman arranged herself on a bench next to Pine Grove's allpurpose multifunction artificial holiday tree, festooned with straw hats and bowties in anticipation of Father's Day. Laura buzzed Rachel, the administrator, but a willowy aide named Vernelle appeared first, patted the old woman's arm with a dark-chocolate hand, wordlessly led her away. Vernelle had been equally silent when Laura had been introduced to her days before, had offered only a hand and nod. Mute? Laura wouldn't be surprised.

"Sounds like a candidate for lockup, to me," a gravely female voice said over Laura's shoulder. A pudgy finger pointed to the retreating couple, then to her own ample bust adorned with the required Pine Grove name tag. "Doris. From housekeeping."

Rachel the administrator emerged from her office across the lobby, summer skirt swishing against her legs. "Memory Care, Doris. Not lockup. Laura, you buzzed?"

"One of the patients was a little confused. Vernelle took her back to her room."

"*Residents*, not patients. Assisted living is different from a nursing home." The space between Rachel's brows folded into frown lines. She sashayed toward Doris. "One thing I won't tolerate is treating our residents like they're not quite there. Just because they don't walk or talk very well or can't cut their food or remember what happened five minutes ago, that doesn't mean they're not still *in* there somewhere." She tapped her

temple. "Your life is as intense and interesting to you the day you die as it was the day you got married."

"Sure," Doris muttered. "Even when you fall into a coma."

"If you're in a coma, you're in a nursing home and not assisted living. Besides, how do you know what it's like to be in a coma?" Rachel's cheeks sprouted rougey patches of emotion. "Every person here . . . we're going to assume they're living their life as fully as you're living yours."

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For a whole year after Colby was killed, Ossie apologized to Laura at least once a week. He arrived bearing triangles of cheese, geraniums for her patio, monogrammed cards for the postfuneral correspondence.

"Laura, I'm so sorry. I want you to know how bad I feel. Every day. Every minute."

"You're lucky you're not doing time," she told him.

"You need anything, just say the word. Somebody to fix the roof. Money.

Anything."

"I'd die in debtor's prison first," she said.

On his last visit, Ossie put a tin of wine crackers into her hand and stood so close she could smell his bourbony breath. She flung the tin back, satisfied to hear the solid thwack it made on his chest.

"Look at you! All boozed up! How dare you!" The tin rattled to the floor. Ossie gasped from the blow. "Driving over here drunk with a revoked license! You really feel so bad? Fine. End it right now. Drive yourself over a cliff somewhere. Make the world

safe for innocent passengers like Colby. Go on! Get out of here! Don't come back!"

She knew he wouldn't kill himself; he was too sane and cowardly. But if he got into a wreck any time in the next ten years, now Laura would have *that* on her, too. She moved a couple of months later.

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Pine Grove was more than ninety percent women, average age eightythree, pale presences with complexions gray as mushroom soup and minds of beige puree. Laura never saw the ones upstairs in lockup (despite Rachel's admonitions, nobody called it Memory Care), but she met the others in the genteel floralpapered dining room, as they negotiated overcooked vegetables past uncertain dentures. The few men at Pine Grove tended not to stay long. Their guilty relatives took them out while the women languished until they dropped.

But Mr. Rowe had stayed, a tall man, still imposing, sleekly bald across the top of a wide, handsome head. Laura was finishing lunch in the dining room when he tooled up to her in his wheelchair and thrust out a hefty left hand. "Herb Rowe from Idaho. Other hand's no good. Leg either. Two strokes."

She shook his hand. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Worst thing you can do is wish you could have it back. So you're Laura. How long did it take you to get your lunch? Staff shortage is always worse on Saturdays, you know."

"I've heard about the people who call in sick on weekends. Not me. I'm reliable."

Laura smiled politely.

"You know why they can't keep help around here?"

Rachel meandered over, a broccoli floret in one hand, napkin in the other. "Now, Herb, we just hired her. You're going to scare her away."

"It's because they don't teach them to think longterm. Right now the hotels out at the beach are busy. They'll hire about anybody and pay good money because it's the season. Come fall, they'll lay them off. How old are you, Laura?"

"Fortytwo." She thought he had a nerve.

"Well, you're not old enough to remember this, but let me tell you a story." Pawing the carpet with his good left foot, he inched his wheelchair closer. "I didn't grow up in Idaho. I grew up in a coal town in Pennsylvania. Well, those buggers, they got the union in there and asked for triple their wages. They got it, too. But that made it cheaper to burn oil, and pretty soon the plant shut down. That's when we headed west. Now, you tell me, Laura. Which would you rather have? Seven dollars an hour and a whole day's work, or twenty dollars an hour and no work at all?" He graced her with a lazy, cockeyed smile that showed what a charmer he thought he was.

Across the room fat, deaf Mrs. Nelson stopped shoveling chicken pot pie into her mouth long enough to gag and regurgitate everything she'd eaten, along with a full upper plate that landed on her blouse. Tears welled in her small, piggy eyes even as she struggled to catch her breath. The sight locked Laura into static fascination: Mrs. Nelson upchucking, Mr. Rowe averting his eyes, Rachel taking it in with expressionless calm, not budging except to lower her broccoli toward her napkin. Out of nowhere Vernelle appeared, legs beneath her short uniform tough and sinewy as Michael Jordan's at the apex of his basketball days. She plucked

the soiled dentures off Mrs. Nelson's chest and bent toward the woman's hearing aid. "It's all right now. You all right now. Here, let me help you clean up."

Not a mute, after all.

Rachel started in Mrs. Nelson's direction, but Vernelle wiped the old woman's mouth and began pushing her wheelchair out of the room so efficiently that Rachel apparently reconsidered. Balling her napkin, the administrator turned back to Mr. Rowe. "Now that you've given Laura your economics lesson for the day, how about doing current events tomorrow?"

"No, thanks. What's the use? Women aren't interested in that." Then, gauging her expression, "Well, some are. But most of them can't hear. Or they fall asleep."

Rachel crossed her arms over a flat chest and gripped her elbows with her hands. "Suit yourself, Herb."

Mr. Rowe winked at Laura as Rachel sauntered away. Not wanting to encourage him, Laura turned her attention to a sulky girl who'd come in to mop up Mrs. Nelson's mess.

"Where you from, Laura?" Mr. Rowe asked.

"Up north."

"Anywhere in particular?"

Was it any of his business?

"Well, up north, that's a good place. People up there have a work ethic. Down here everybody's so slow. Black people especially." He nodded without embarrassment toward the mopup girl, then in the other direction. "Or Leroy over there."

Leroy, carrying a slice of cake across the room, was not quite out of earshot.

"He brings plates out of the kitchen one by one when anyone can see it would get done faster if he'd bring a tray. Sometimes half a table is ready to leave before the others even get served. Slow as if he's moving backwards."

"That's just a stereotype."

"And Vernelle who doesn't talk."

"She talked just now. You heard her."

Mr. Rowe put on an abashed expression, ran a hand across his bald pate as if pushing back hair. "Gosh, I got no real complaints. Everybody here is nice as they can be. They just need a little organization."

Laura rose to go. Doris caught up with her in the hall. "Oh, honey, don't let him get to you, he's just got a bad case of WMS."

"Pardon?"

"White Male Syndrome. They're so used to being spoiled and pampered and getting everything they want. Why, they wouldn't be able to live here if they weren't. They pay near three thousand dollars a month just for room and board."

"The women pay it, too."

"Women are milder. You work here long enough, you'll see." Amusement rippled across Doris's round face like waves across pudding. "That man will do everything he can to sell you a bill of goods. Herbert Rowe's as tricky as a trial lawyer."

"Probably *was* a trial lawyer."

"Hush, Laura. He was not. He had some kind of business. Dry goods. What's dry

goods, anyway? Who'd want *wet* goods?"

"*Champagne's* wet."

"I tell you, dry goods is a mystery."

"Why don't you ask him, then? He sounds like someone who'd be glad to give you the twohour seminar."

"Thanks, but I'll pass."

In the reception area, Doris plopped her elbows on Laura's desk as if she planned to stay a while. "What makes you mad is, he's right about the food service. And about people calling in sick."

"And Vernelle," Laura said. "I never heard her talk before today."

"She lost one of her kids in a fire."

"Does she have other kids?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

Laura thought she knew all about loss, but this shamed her. When she was younger she'd feared losing Colby to infidelity, never imagined it would be at the hands of drunken Ossie at the wheel. Colby had been drunk, too.

"How long ago? The fire."

"Couple of years"

"Is she any better?"

"You don't get better," Doris said.