”to visit widows in their affliction” -James 1:27

Mirian Alert*

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Abstract

MARGARET swerved past the davenport, fluffed the pillows and picked up the magazines on the way through the living room. She caught a glimpse of her auburn hair in the mirror on the closet door and ran her fingers through the fullness. The chimes rang. Margaret opened the door...
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"Are we early? I hope you weren't resting," said a warm, familiar voice. A tall, thin woman stood at the door. Her arms were filled with a pyrex casserole, a small leather purse, *The Lutheran Standard*, and a bulky brown paper sack.

"Oh, no, no, Miriam. Come in!" Margaret held the door open for Miriam and the cluster of ladies forming behind her. They filed in, brown paper sacks crackling. Their delicate perfumes mixed with a delicious aroma of food.

"Margaret, this is Olive Pryeth," Miriam introduced a large woman with tightly waved graying hair and gold rimmed bifocals.

"Have to wipe my glasses," said Mrs. Pryeth, setting her purse and a pan of rolls on the desk. She shook Margaret's hand.

"And Faith Christianson," continued Miriam.

"Hello." Faith's smile seemed familiar. Margaret
thought perhaps they had met.

"And you know Gay," said Miriam. Gay's weathered face erupted profusely in smiles and her head nodded repeatedly.

"Let me help you with all those things," Margaret said. She accepted coats, scarves, and hats.

"Just any place will be fine," said Olive, her lavish smile outlined in bright red lipstick. A large rhinestone brooch flopped at the v between her heavy breasts as she bent over a brown picnic basket. "We thought you might enjoy a meal you didn't have to prepare. I know how it is alone. No fun cooking just for yourself."

"Well, no. The children have hot lunch at school and . . . ."

"Yes, we understand. My husband passed away when Richard was just a little fellow. What I went through! I know what it's like to be left alone." She scrambled in the basket. "Let's see," she said, and pulled a generous apron from it. She made a grand figure with a picnic basket, Margaret thought.

"My dear Margaret," said Faith, clasping Margaret's hand. "We want you to know we've all been thinking about you and praying for you—the Lord will see you through!" She patted Margaret's hand and shook it simultaneously. "Just trust in him, and everything will be all right," she cajoled.

"Good of you to come," Margaret said, looking at Faith's clear blue eyes. Her sincerity was apparent, although Margaret hardly knew the woman.

"Margaret?" Miriam called from the big kitchen beyond the living room.

"Come on out," Margaret invited the other ladies. She led the way to the kitchen.

"Would it be all right to just slip this baked dish in the oven a few minutes?" asked Miriam.

"Why, yes. Here, I'll turn it on. Three hundred?"

"That'll be fine. My husband wanted me to tell you he was sorry he hadn't gotten out to see you since the funeral. He's had two weddings this week."

"Well, I certainly understand. I wasn't expecting him," replied Margaret.

Miriam and Gay set the table neatly with dishes and
silver produced from a styrofoam box.

"My! I don't know what to say," Margaret honestly said.

The four women busied themselves serving a shimmering green salad, relishes on crushed ice, homemade cinnamon rolls, applie pie.

"What a committee you have, Miriam!" said Margaret.
"You just enjoy it today," Miriam said. "We thought this would give you a chance to relax, and we'd have a good visit." She lifted a bubbling stroganoff from the oven, and the women sat down.

"Have you been able to think about going back to work?" asked Mrs. Pryeth, sliding into the pause after "Amen." "Course, I 'magine you have hospital insurance and all. Working'd pro'bly help get your mind off things."

"I haven't given it much thought," answered Margaret.
"It might be easier for you in town," Gay said. "Of course rent is higher in town. Nils heard this place has been sold."

"I haven't talked with Mr. Dries since last week," said Margaret. "I really wouldn't know."
"Well, it will work out, dear. Give it time. And you have friends," Olive assured her. Her ample arms held out a large bowl of macaroni as evidence.

"Thank you. This is delicious."
"Yes, everyone thought so much of your husband," said Gay. "Nils is going to pick corn just as soon as the ground is dry. Woulda got it done last fall, but, well, your husband asked him kinda late."
"Yes," said Margaret.
"Lota farmers got corn in the field this spring," Gay added. Margaret nodded agreement. "Won't have to dry it so much now, you know," said Gay.

Margaret swallowed with difficulty and smiled at Gay. "Leastways that's not your worry!" Gay emphasized "that."

"There! That's all right." Olive patted Margaret's shoulder. "You go right ahead and cry. Crying helps. Here, let me get you some more coffee." Olive bustled toward the electric urn as though to irrigate the lachrymal ducts. "If you can't cry in front of friends, . . . Better than letting the children know! They have their little crosses to bear too."
"The Lord has given you two little lives to mold," said Faith. "And he will bless you in the work. Just day by day trust in him." She pulled a blue plastic card from her purse and handed it to Margaret. "EXPECT A MIRACLE!" it said in iridescent letters. "I have one over my sink. It helps me pray when I'm washing dishes."

"Thank you," said Margaret, aware of some irreverence.

"I said to Nils it was a beautiful funeral. Short, but still nice," said Gay constructively. Food passed curiously through her smile. "I always liked flowers, course some people'd rather give money. Like I always said, depends on what you're used to."

"Now you take your Women's Missionary League," Olive addressed anyone. "I know when I was president we voted to give for husbands. If you're a league member, that'll bring five dollars."

"Not so many give flowers anymore," reflected Gay with an astonishing smile. "Flowers are terrible high."

"My, I couldn't help thinking what a nice-looking young man your husband was," said Faith. She smiled at Margaret too. "He just looked so natural. Just as though he could talk. I'm sure he must have been a devoted husband." Margaret's cheeks burned. Impalpable food lay in her mouth.

"My husband certainly enjoyed meeting your dad," interjected Miriam pointedly. "He said your father joked about being the grandson of a Methodist minister."

"Oh, yes, my great grandfather was a circuit rider," said Margaret, swallowing hard. "That's definitely outside the pale of the Lutheran faith!" Margaret laughed conspicuously. Her dress clung to her armpits.

"Well, there's a lot of good Methodists. I believe that," said Gay, obviously proud of her remark, and then recklessly. "Even Cath'lics! People can't always help the way they was brought up, you know. Like I always said, there ain't gonna be a separate heaven for everybody." Chimes rang in the ecumenical air. Margaret excused herself to go to the door. "Plenty of dessert if there's some more comin'," sang Gay hopefully.

In a short time three young women dressed in bright slacks crowded in front of the narrow doorway of the kitchen. Margaret addressed the first camp, "I'd like you to meet my
neighbors.” Margaret introduced the three newcomers and there was an effervescent exchange of greetings, establishing command in the old guard.

The ladies took saucers of pie to the living room and sat down with the bereaved. Some had knitting, others brought embroidery, one had a large crocheted afghan in strips. Margaret felt the intermittent menstrual cramps that had persisted. She was tired.

Gradually it evolved that death was an old ethnic custom! It dated back to the days of wake, and Margaret had frustrated well-meaning friends far and wide by avoiding a reception at the funeral home. Days were recalled when folks took turns spelling off the family sitting up all night with the body. In gratitude the family served good German beer and sometimes sausage. One lady only mentioned her uncle’s wake. Margaret had heard that name before, and the story that near dawn the body was leaned in a corner while the guests tried the coffin:

Voices ran together in senseless dissonance. Gallbladders, Amway miracles, and chicken supplements appeared, wonderfully as the crest and furl of the Christian banner. In many little ways friends shared their deepest thoughts with the soul in mourning. She sat at the bowels of mercy, wondering where to find the analysis of last year’s soil samples for Mr. Dries.

She thought of the piles of letters on the table in the study. The letter from the bank dropped over a bookend on the desk. She took her coffee to the study and answered the telephone. “Oh yes, Mr. Anderson. The clerk said the certificates of death would be ready this afternoon, but I haven’t picked them up.” Margaret closed the door. “The insurance policies are in the safety deposit box at the bank. I could make it in the morning. Nine o’clock?” Margaret dialed another number, looking out the window at snow falling coldly on the bird feeder her husband had built. “Ione, do you have time to do John’s travel expense report? I knew the council met tonight, and I’m running out of time.” Something Ione said left Margaret smiling. “Yes, whole roomful! Thanks very much!” Margaret suppressed a laugh with a gulp of lukewarm coffee, hanging up the phone. Laughing
had become delicious. Embarrassing inappropriate peals of laughter wanted to come out anytime, on the slightest provocation. It frightened her. "Operator, I'd like to call Des Moines." A low grade headache pressed from the back of her neck. Margaret completed the call and wandered back to her guests.

"My aunt's sister-in-law died of cancer," Olive was saying as Margaret returned. "She married a man got three high school kids." Olive plopped a skein of fluorescent yarn on the row of pipes beside the big leather chair. "Some do that. Like I always said, I just wasn't interested."

The school bus doors phoomed shut at the end of the drive. The sound of children's voices interrupted conversation. "I guess we'll have to be going, Margaret," said Miriam, looking at her watch.

The group broke up in restless exchanging of courtesies. The women collected the accumulated paraphernalia in a business-like way. In a few minutes they marched valiantly into the snow. The house felt empty.

"Can we turn on cartoons now?" asked Margaret's daughter softly.

Margaret felt the burning in her cheeks return and suddenly faced her daughter. "Get upstairs and change your clothes!" she shouted angrily, brimming tears rolling down her cheeks. Instantly her body fixed in pain. She veered around furniture stumbling, holding the hardness in her abdomen.

The study door slammed violently behind her. "God damn! Oh, God damn!" she cried out. Boxes of stationery clattered on the floor. "Never, never, NEVER! Not one more letter!" She flung the door open, banging the plaster. "And that goes for this whole damned show! 'Just trust in him'" she mimicked. "Now how in hell do I do that?" She wandered aimlessly the length of the room, rocking her gaunt frame forward and back. "Oh, God! Oh, God!" she cried and flung her body into the big chair. The grainy cowhide smelled faintly of pipe tobacco. Margaret's eyes pinched tightly shut. "John, I'm afraid," she whispered.

When she awoke snow was drifting bleakly over the wind-bent stalks of unharvested corn.