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Heritage

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Abstract

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“YES, DOCTOR. . . .I’ll tell her, doctor. . . .Of course doctor. . . .” Mrs. Monroe murmured a few more automatic phrases and then hung up the phone. How could she possibly break the news about Peter to old Mary? If there was only someone else who could tell. . . .But there wasn’t. Mrs. Monroe had grown up with her and was about the closest friend Mary Judd had. . . .if anyone could get close to old Mary.

“Best I get it over with now,” she sighed to herself as she slipped on her coat. She shuddered a little at the prospect. The only time Mrs. Monroe ever went out there any more was to leave laundry, and the only reason she did that was because she knew Mary needed the money and the business. Most people just didn’t want to tangle with iron-hearted Mary. That hard stare of her cold steel-like eyes was enough to keep anyone away.

Mrs. Monroe started the ’41 Chevie with a roar and headed away from town. Twenty-seven years ago who’d have thought vivacious Mary Parker would end up like this? Mrs. Monroe could still remember that bright Saturday afternoon when Mary came flying up the path with dancing eyes and exuberant hands.

“Aggie! Aggie!” she had screamed in her high intense voice. “It’s true at last! After three years it finally came true!”

She and Ben must be getting married, for what else had Mary been dreaming of these last few years? Aloud Aggie had shared her enthusiasm. “Ben! He finally came through. I think that’s wonderful!” Then remembering the reason for the delay, “Where are you going to live?”

“Oh. I forgot to tell you.” Mary’s expression attempted to be more somber. “Mr. Judd died last night. It was for the best after being sick so many years, Ben says. Anyway, his mom and the girls are moving to the city so we can have the farm. I’ve never seen it. . . .Ben never took me out because of his father, you know. . . .but I’ll love it.”

Mrs. Monroe remembered frowning and saying, "I hear the Judd place has become run down a bit."

"Oh, Ben says it's not in the best of condition, but we can fix it up. Anyway, in a few years we'll probably be building a bigger and better house. We're gonna get a new car, and maybe more animals, too. It'll be lots of fun. . . just me and Ben and maybe later some more (I can hardly wait to have children, lots of them!) . . . and maybe someday" Her voice had trailed off as she thought of the ambitions she and Ben had not put into words. Ambitions that were always to remain just dreams.

Mrs. Monroe turned the car into the weedy driveway of the still run-down Judd place and a lump rose in her throat. The years had been tragic ones for Mary Judd, but this news would climax them all. Peter was all she had. Her only mainstay in life shattered, and Mrs. Monroe had to tell her of it. She could not; yet she must.

She paused in front of the dilapidated house that hadn't seen a coat of paint in years. The big oak tree was growing into the corner of the house but Mary wouldn't let anyone touch so much as one leaf on that tree, and she herself never went near it. But Mrs. Monroe could understand this. She had been there that tragic day twenty years ago and she too preferred to avoid the tree.

Mr. Monroe had wanted to see Ben about repairing some tools, so they went out to the Judd place that Sunday. It was a pale and weary Mary that had greeted them and Mrs. Monroe could still vividly remember Mary's toneless words and half-hearted smile. "Ben," she had called flatly from the porch. "Ben. Company." Then after a pause, she had smiled thinly and mumbled some apology for his lack of response. "He's probably working too hard to hear. I'll go get him." Whipping a strand of straggly hair back with a practiced twist, she had departed with swift lengths down the scarred path.

Mary found Ben, and a few minutes later the Monroes found both of them under that big oak tree. Ben was sitting leaning against the tree unhearing, unseeing, unmoving . . . living, but without recognition, without acknowledgment. Mary was standing over him staring helplessly with a cold gaze that seemed to be full of hate at the blankness that was her husband. There had been little Anna whom she'd ten-

derly nursed through a cold winter, only to see her fade with the crops in the heavy August heat. And George who had never breathed at all. And then there was Michael with his tiny twisted body —that baby body that they feared would *not* die. Now this. And Mary had never uttered a sound.

Mrs. Monroe cringed as she recalled the scene. She had been there then. That's why the doctor wanted her to tell Mary now. But how could she possibly break it to her? Peter was the only baby that had been born without blemish . . . the only one that had survived those hard years. Steaming tubs of neighbor's laundry, sheets and towels bleaching on taut lines, a scanty garden for winter food that often wasn't enough for two, so she went without . . . all this for Peter. "He must go to college and get away from this place," Mary had told Aggie, setting her thin lips and firm jaw more grimly and determinedly than usual.

Well, there's nothing I can do now but tell her, Mrs. Monroe told herself as she crossed the sagging porch with heavy heart. She opened the warped screen door and entered the cold dingy room. Twenty-seven years ago this room held the warmth and gaiety that youth gave it. Now Mrs. Monroe felt only the obscure drabness of a marred table behind two laundry tubs, two straight chairs beside the scowling black stove, and the bare impersonal walls with their layers of soot and grime. The doors to the two tiny bedrooms were open, revealing only a musty gloom within each room. From the kitchen came the eerie shadows of a kerosene lamp even though dusk had not yet settled. Aggie could hear Mary stirring around, so she softly called to her.

Mary responded sharply, "You might as well leave now. I ain't doing no laundries today."

Mrs. Monroe shook her head sadly. "Now Mary, I didn't even bring a laundry today. I came to talk to you. I'm afraid I have some rather unpleasant news for you."

"Is there another kind?" The owner of this bitter voice appeared in the doorway: a thin angular woman with coloring to match her gray toneless hair. The only dominant features on her hard face were the dark hollows from which gleamed two narrow slits of steel.

"Mary, it's about Peter."

"What about Peter?" Mary angrily jumped to the defense of her only joy in life. "Ain't he good enough for you? He's at

college, ain't he, just like your boys, and he's getting good grades. He ain't done nothin' wrong, either, I know. Not my boy. He's a good one, my Peter."

"No, Mary, he's done nothing wrong. Peter has always been a wonderful boy. But..."

Suddenly Mary turned stark white and the hardness of her face vanished. Mrs. Monroe was vaguely reminded of the Mary she knew years ago and watched aghast as big tears... probably the first in many years... splashed down the dry hollowed cheeks. Mary knew.

"I was too late, Aggie," she sobbed in a pitiful girlish pitch. "I was too late. I couldn't save him. It got him, too, just like it got Ben and his father. Oh, Peter!... Peter!... My darling Peter!" And iron-hearted Mary became convulsed in sobs.

Mrs. Monroe stood unbelieving at what she saw. Then she impulsively put an arm around the broken sobbing figure. "He's in the state sanitarium at Clarinda. Perhaps they can help him," she said, but without reassurance. For what was it the doctor had said? Hereditary dementia... a father to son trait... no known cure.

— Louise Castle, *Sci. So.*



Lettuce Leaves and Letters

Sleepy girls crash head-on
In the dark morning.
Toothpaste and wet wash-rags —
It's too early to laugh.

Three girls walking through a door.
One missing.
Hanging on the door,
"My coat's caught."