People Need People

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Abstract

This has to be the Meyers’ house. The young man let the heavy brass arm of the knocker fall against the metal plate on the walnut door. Mrs. Meyer collected old-fashioned things when we were neighbors. Didn’t they have a knocker like this even then?
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English and Speech, Sr.

THIS HAS to be the Meyers' house. The young man let the heavy brass arm of the knocker fall against the metal plate on the walnut door. Mrs. Meyer collected old-fashioned things when we were neighbors. Didn't they have a knocker like this even then? He purposely concentrated on this specific flash of memory as he waited on the brick steps, his suede coat secured up to the top button against the chill evening breeze. Deep in reverie, he was unaware of the welcome signs of spring evident in the greening grass, the flowering crab across the neighbor's picket fence and the scattered, colorful tulips.

The door knob turned, and he sent a last glance down the curved sidewalk that had led him from his car, parked just off the graveled street, to this small white house with its slowly opening door. His passive self—the one which ordinarily controlled his actions—almost panicked. Too late to get away now. You'll have to go through with it. His more active personality—the one that had urged him to make this trip—wondered, What will she be like?

The soft brown eyes of the young woman behind the door asked, Who are you? as her pleasant voice noncommittally said, “Hello.”

“Mary Beth? that is, Miss Meyer?” The man held out his hand toward the woman as she nodded her head in questioning affirmation. “I'm Ralph Brown. You may not remember me, but. . . .”

“Ralph?” Mary Beth’s forehead squinched up in puzzled lines. “Ralph Brown?” A smile almost erased the question in her eyes as she looked up at him. “Why, you're Bev’s little brother!”
“Yes,” he said. “I wondered if you’d remember me. It’s been . . .”

“Ten years.” Mary Beth broke in so quickly it almost seemed as if she had counted off each year the way a child throws off the days on the calendar before Christmas. “And you’re really grown up, Ralph.” She shivered as the cool breeze struck her bare arms. A suggestion of hesitation accompanied her invitation, “Won’t you come in?” but she added in a firmer voice, “It’s not comfortable out here.” She stepped back, opening the door wide for his entrance, and missed seeing, although sensing, the flutter of the lace curtain at the front-door window across the street. This will give them something to talk about finally. Wonder how soon old lady Hanson will be over to check up on us?

Ralph followed the trim figure across the entrance hall and into the living room. Mary Beth asked for his wraps. While she went to hang them up in the hall closet, Ralph stood beside the fireplace, enjoying the warmth from the burning log, and frankly looked around the room, wondering if he would see any familiar pieces. The antique settee under the windows, although newly-recovered to match the drapes, was the same one on which he’d sat, stiffly formal in the presence of Rev. and Mrs. Meyer, and, yes, there was their old desk with the numerous pigeonholes under a roll top that had held fascination for him. Do you suppose, it suddenly occurred to him, that is why I work in the post office where I have mailboxes to fill, like a whole wall of pigeonholes? He smiled to himself at the idea and turned toward Mary Beth as she re-entered the room.

“I still think there’s something special about a fire in the fireplace.” Mary Beth noticed where Ralph was standing. “Why don’t you pull that chair over by it?” She indicated behind him a sturdy, wooden captain’s chair, with a comfortable cushion in it. “You probably feel a little cold and tired if you’ve been driving long.” She herself sat, almost perched on the edge of a companion chair, already drawn close enough to the fire so that her slippered feet had rested cozily in front of it. A television tray that stood between her chair and the wall caught Ralph’s eye. It held an empty milk glass, a browning quarter of an apple, a napkin full of crumbs, and a gaily-covered book with a marker peeking out from its middle. Following his glance, Mary Beth offered,
“I’ve had my Saturday evening snack and was reading one of the new books the library just bought.” She picked it up and replaced it, carefully avoiding the crumbs. “That’s an enjoyable part of my job as librarian.” She looked directly at Ralph. “But what about you, Ralph? What do you do?” Her eyes were still asking, What brings you here?

“I still live in the old home town,” he said. This is as good an opening as I could have asked for. I wish I knew the best way to tell her. “You say you’re a librarian? Well, I serve the public too, Mary Beth.” Maybe this will help prepare her. “I work in the post office.” I’d better just go ahead and break the news. I don’t have any idea how she’ll react, but she seems calm enough. I wonder why she wrote? “I looked you up about that letter you sent my brother, Tom. He . . .”

“Oh,” Mary Beth almost gasped, “that letter! I’m not sure what possessed me to write it.” She went on nervously, not heeding Ralph’s anguished expression on being interrupted. “I was going through my mother’s papers after her funeral and . . .”

“I didn’t know your mother was dead, too,” Ralph interposed. That explains several things: her hesitation in asking me in, the more relaxed atmosphere in here, like moving the chairs close to the fire and her eating from trays. “I’m sorry to hear that news.”

But Mary Beth had been unaware that Ralph had even spoken. The mention of the letter had transported her thoughts back to the gloomy afternoon when she had finally gone through the remnants of her mother’s life, all wrapped in newspapers and stacked in neatly-tied bundles. “Mother had cherished mementoes from each pastorate they served. I remember her sorting through her personal possessions when Father died soon after we moved into this house they had bought for their retirement years.” Mary Beth looked at Ralph without seeing him. “She didn’t unwrap them; she just told them off, town by town: ‘There’s Chicago and the Seminary, then this one is Dunkerton; here’s Sac City, Clear Lake, Red Oak, and, in South Dakota, Watertown and Goodwin.’” Mary Beth sighed and made visual contact with Ralph again. “Do you know what I found when I came to the package from your town?”
Ralph could only shake his head for a mute "no" before Mary Beth plunged on.

"Mother—of all people—had kept every clipping from that year's state basketball tournament. Remember how excited we all were?" She paused, and Ralph nodded again. "Right on top was the picture from the peach section of the Des Moines Sunday Register showing Tom's big grin just after he sank that winning basket." Her voice slowed and softened. "You know, my folks always had wanted a son. I think if they could have picked one, he'd have been like Tom, a good student, a great athlete, and . . ."

"Yes," Ralph responded, "we all loved Tom. He was so—so alive."

"But, even though he was a mighty senior that year when Bev and I were only freshmen, he always took time to smile and visit with us." Mary Beth looked shyly at Ralph. "In fact, he was nicer to us than we were to a certain eighth grader that year."

"I couldn't have cared less," Ralph insisted. His hands felt clammy. How am I going to tell her?

"We moved at the end of that school year." Mary Beth made the statement matter-of-factly. "I never was as much a part of the group after that." Her voice saddened. "I really missed Bev, but," again it became matter-of-fact, "although we corresponded through our high school days, we lost contact with each other when we started to college."

"All three of us went to Ames," Ralph commented.

"I attended the same small church college in Kansas that my parents had," Mary Beth added, "and I've been working in the library here ever since."

"How did you happen to land here?" Ralph was curious. "I only knew where to find you from the return address on your letter."

"This is where my parents had their first parish. For them, it was a homecoming, but not for me," she frowned. Then she continued, "I'm used to it now, but there's no one my age here." She looked at Ralph, puzzled. "I explained that in my letter. Haven't you read it?"

"No, that's why I'm here." Now that he had her attention, Ralph almost forgot what he had to say. He'd been so absorbed in thinking back to the days she had recalled,
when his big brother had been his hero, as well as all the things Ralph was not: popular, athletic, tall and strong, and an excellent student. "I—I," he cleared his throat. "Tom's dead. He died the first year after finishing college." Ralph looked at Mary Beth with concern. "It was such a blow to my parents. One week they had a son they were extra proud of—he was teaching in a small town nearby, and the kids loved him—and the next week he was dead, just because of a mix-up with some sulfa medicine no one even suspected he was allergic to." Ralph paused to catch his breath and to lighten his voice which grew harsh whenever he remembered. "I was named his executor—my father was a broken man—so all of Tom's papers went through my hands." The expression on Mary Beth's face told him she understood. "Of course, it has been quite a while since anything of a personal nature came through the mails for him . . ."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Mary Beth exclaimed, "I . . ."

"No, don't be. You couldn't know," Ralph consoled her. "I was more surprised than shocked to see his name on your letter. Then when I saw the return address," his voice grew thoughtful, "I didn't feel that I wanted to either open your letter to my brother or stamp it 'deceased' and mail it back to you." He reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and drew out a white envelope. "I looked up your address in the atlas." Ralph stood up. "Even though you live in a different state, you're only 150 miles from my home." He walked over to her and held out the piece of mail. "I decided to make a personal delivery."

"Oh, Ralph." Tears brimmed in Mary Beth's eyes. She shook her head to clear them away and took the envelope. "Of all the thoughts I had when I sent this old clipping," she indicated the letter, "I never dreamed that such a young, vibrant personality would be gone." Her voice was full of longing. "I think I really wanted to get in touch with the people I knew in a happy time of my life."

Ralph reached over to touch her shoulder and then gave an involuntary, startled jump as the front door burst open and a hearty, "Yoo-hoo," responded through the house.

"I meant to warn you, Ralph," Mary Beth whispered, "but I forgot. She's another Mrs. Snyder." Mary Beth rose
and called out, "We're in the living room, Mrs. Hanson. Come and meet my guest."

"Oh, I just ran over to borrow a cup of brown sugar." The squarely-built woman, decked out in a blue-flowered print dress covered with a striped apron, had thrown a scarf over her gray hair and was puffing a little from her quick trip across the road. "I was making cookies for the shut-ins—our circle visits with them tomorrow—and after the stores closed, I found I needed some more brown sugar." Holding out an aluminum measuring cup to Mary Beth, she turned her question-mark eyes on Ralph. "So you belong to that out-of-state car parked out front, eh?"

Ralph nodded, wondering what the best reply would be.

"This is Ralph Brown," Mary Beth explained. "He was in one of my father's confirmation classes."

"Oh," the light blue eyes brightened. "He was a saint, he was." Evidently Ralph passed inspection because of his association with Mary Beth's father. "But," Mrs. Hanson added on her way out the door with the sugar, "don't stay too late. Mary Beth's got to be at Sunday school early to play the piano."

"I really mustn't stay much longer tonight," Ralph realized. "I noticed a motel on the edge of town." He was making plans aloud. "How will it be if I come back for you in the morning?" It was Mary Beth's turn to nod. "I would enjoy going to church with you, and then later, we could look over all those clippings together."

"That'll be fine, if you really want to." Mary Beth didn't sound quite sure of herself. It had been one thing to send a letter to a picture and a name out of the past, but it was quite another to have a real person materialize in response to it. If he goes to church with me in the morning, how can I explain it to everyone? Doesn't he realize that would be tantamount to announcing our engagement? Not quite meeting Ralph's eyes, Mary Beth pointed to the telephone in the hallway. "Why don't you check with the motel while I fix some coffee for us? The phone book is right there," she added as she went into the kitchen.

After making the telephone call, Ralph joined Mary Beth in the kitchen. "I'm sorry about tomorrow," he said as he sat down at the table set for two, "but it looks as if I'd better head back home tonight."
"Oh?"
"The local motel has no vacancies and they told me that on Highway 22, the next one is fifty miles away."
"That's too bad," Mary Beth couldn't quite keep all the relief from her voice, "but I understand. Perhaps we'll see each other again some day." Her voice held genuine sorrow as she went on, "I am sad about Tom. You don't know how much I appreciate your thoughtfulness in looking me up personally."

Later, as Ralph drove homeward, he unconsciously whistled a popular tune. I enjoyed seeing Mary Beth, but I guess she's as comfortable in her little world as I am in mine. But the music filling his car was,

"People, who need people,
Are the luckiest people in the world."

J. D. Crawford: 1898-1963

Dean Womeldorf
History, Soph.

In the dying embers of daylight
I heard an old man cry
Someone yelled bring water and a doctor
Quickly run fetch your mother
He needs the touch of a woman's hand on his brow
I ran and stumbled through a cornfield
And told my mother heavily breathin'
Old Man Crawford's sick
They want you and hurry Ma he's sick
She ran I followed through the corn
And burst through Crawford's kitchen door
Pa a gasp close his eyes
And wash his sweaty face clean