

The Vigil

Joanie had been here for three deaths already. Mr. Drees was the first to be awake. He was an older black man whose cancer had undressed him of muscle and fat. His head seemed too large for his shoulders.

“I been a Methodist from the cradle,” Mr. Drees said. “Never thought I’d end up in a place called St. Whatever.”

“It’s a good facility,” Joanie said. “My grandmother was here.”

“She go home?”

“No. She passed away.”

“Then it ain’t that good,” he said. “But they take my insurance.”

Joanie smiled.

“Why you do this?” he asked.

“Do what?”

“Sit with folks here.”

Joanie wondered this herself. She wasn't religious, and every motive she could name felt contrived. “It's my way of giving back. I'm here to listen.”

Mr. Drees turned his head to the window. Sunset was an hour behind them. “To listen,” he said, and then, “You know, if I told you something—that I done something pretty bad in my time...it's been a long while, though...”

“Whatever you need to say. I'll keep it between us. Promise.”

“Back when our girls was young,” he said, seeming not to hear her, “we had these neighbors. Two old sisters. They was nice. I got a bat out they chimney once, but I kept leery of them. Only smart, I thought. Them being white, and it being Tennessee. And one day my gut was proved right.

“One of the sisters calls me over. She says, ‘Johnny, Miss Thea fell down the stairs. Can you help me get her up?’ I says, ‘Yes, Miss Ethel,’ but I don't move. She asks me am I coming. I says, ‘Don't you want the doctor?’ She says, ‘I got to get her up first. I ain't strong like you.’

“So I go in the house. Miss Thea on her face in the basement, all squashed up in her dress. I says, ‘Miss Ethel, she gone.’ She says, ‘You ain't lying. She done slipped on her skirt for the last time.’

“That set my heart running. I says, ‘Let me call the undertaker.’ She says, ‘No, sir, I won't. I can't live without I get her So' Security check.’ I says, ‘Then what you

want from me?’ And she says, ‘I got a proposal for you. You get your trowel and your bricks’—I was a mason—‘and you seal her up in the ice room down there. I will give you twenty-five dollars cash for it.’

“I was scared. I says, ‘What if I got a compunction?’ She says, ‘You want to get soft about it, I’ll tell the sheriff you pushed her.’ And I says, ‘Why’d I ever do that?’ And she tells me, ‘A spook don’t need a reason.’

“I look down them steps and they’s blood already dried where Miss Thea hit the floor. Miss Ethel been thinking this up all night.

“So I do it. I get me the trowel and a bag of cement and bricks from the yard down where I work construction. Priscilla not happy with me. I tell her Miss Ethel basement got a leak but she says I’m trifling doing a job on the Sabbath.

“And there I am in that cellar, till dark. Miss Ethel poured Morton salt all over her own birth sister. And wrapped her in newspaper. ‘On account of the smell,’ she says. I almost gag, except I got to finish. Miss Ethel don’t give me a penny till I do it. ‘I thank you, sir,’ she says. I’d ‘spected her to brain me with a flower pot and finish the plastering herself.”

Joanie said, “Nobody found out?”

“Not that I heard. I reckoned Miss Ethel die soon and I wouldn’t have to worry about nobody knowing. But she didn’t. Just kept smiling at me, like what I done made us close. I had to get out that old neighborhood.” He grimaced. “My girls hated me for moving. Our new town was most all white folks. You couldn’t even

stand at the bus stop.”

Joanie pulled a tissue from the box. “It been a hard thing between me and them ever since,” he said.

“I’m sure they forgive you,” Joanie said.

He glared up at her through his tears. “Who you to say that?”

“Oh, I—”

He turned his head on the pillow. “Shouldn’t a told you nothing. Why don’t you go on now. Get yourself out of here.”

His reflection in the window was riven with grief.

She said, “I’m sorry,” and quickly went into the hall. Shouldering her purse, she vowed, as she had vowed before, that this would be her last night with the hospice program.

She stopped at the desk to sign out. “Something’s come up,” she told the attendant. “It’s a family matter.”

The old woman shrugged. “His daughter’s on the way. She’ll be here soon.”

Joanie headed outside to her car. Rooting for the keys, she found she still had the tissue clutched in her hand. She wiped the dampness from her face, then looked back. Mr. Drees’s window was one pale square among all the others that had fallen dark. The silence settled around her, and she decided to watch for his daughter’s arrival, hoping she would know when her responsibility had ceased.