

Jane Anne stood on the porch, savoring the morning breeze. The air was chilly, although the weather report said it would be in the sixties later on. For now, though, she hugged her fleece cardigan to her chest. The robins had flown farther south, but the sparrows, jays, and cardinals were at the bird feeder getting their breakfast. A squirrel zigzagged his way to the party, eyeing the sunflower seeds with bright, greedy eyes.

Little beggar, Jane Anne thought. “Scat! Shoo!” she said. The squirrel sat on its haunches and looked at her. She thought if it could speak, the squirrel would say, “Were you talking to me?” She laughed; even if she did chase it away, it would be back as soon as she disappeared inside.

She took a few more minutes to admire the last of the sunrise. A few wisps of cloud still showed a faint pink. No one else in the neighborhood was stirring, except for a dark green Honda Civic heading toward town. She waved at Jim Barkley, who was going to the airport to meet his parents; Sue had told her they were flying in from the west coast today. Families were drawing together all across the land to celebrate this most American of holidays.

The thought reminded her that her own family would be here soon. Karen had promised to come help her with the meal, but with Dillon and Savannah underfoot Jane Anne doubted how much help she’d be. Dale might be able to keep them interested in the Macy’s parade, but when Travis and Trent arrived, it would be mayhem. The kids were close enough in age to get along, which was a blessing. Usually Dillon, who was eight, paired off with Travis, who was ten; and Savannah, six, loved acting like a big sister to five-year-old Trent. The last time they had been together they had invented some game of pretend involving removing cushions from the sofa, upending chairs, and raiding the linen closet for sheets.

Kris had driven to Atlanta from Charlotte and picked the boys up the day before. They’d spent the night in a motel—a “guys’ night out” Kris had said—and would start out from Atlanta early this morning. They’d already left, she realized with a start. Time was wasting.

Regretfully, she turned to go back into the house. This was likely to be the last quiet moment she’d have until bedtime. She walked inside and upstairs to wake Larry. To her surprise and relief, he was up and dressed in the slacks and sweater she had laid out for him. “Morning, sweetheart,” she said.

“And to you. What were you doing up so early?”

“Stuffing the turkey. I have it in the oven.”

“So you’re almost finished with dinner?”

Jane Anne laughed. “Yes, after I peel the potatoes, clean the green beans, and make the sweet potato casserole and the Waldorf salad. And the rolls, and oh yes, the pumpkin pies. And a couple pitchers of iced tea. Almost finished.”

Larry combed his hair, watching himself in the mirror as he arranged the part. “Karen said she’d help. I expect she’ll be here as soon as she gets the kids dressed. When do you think Kris will get here?”

“Oh, Lord, not until three or four at the latest. You know how it is traveling with kids; you have to stop at every rest stop on the highway.”

“There aren’t many rest stops in Georgia,” Larry said, putting down the comb. He added, “Won’t it be strange not to have Mary this year?”

“Yes.” Jane Anne was fond of her ex-daughter-in-law and they still corresponded via e-mail and telephone. She even harbored some hope Mary and Kris might get back together, since Kris belatedly had come to appreciate the family he had ignored for too long. But Mary was dating someone else now, and it sounded serious. She hated her grandsons would have yet another change in their young lives, but that was how it was today. Maybe Kris would meet someone, too, if he ever looked up from his computer long enough. She laughed.

“What?” Larry asked.

“I was thinking of Travis and Trent. If Mary remarries and Kris remarries, they’ll have four set of grandparents.”

“But we’ll be the real ones,” Larry said in an attempt to comfort her. “How about breakfast?” After they started down the stairs he asked again, “When is Kris coming?”

“Pretty soon,” she said without elaborating this time.

Shortly after Larry ate his oatmeal and toast, Karen, Dale, and the children walked in the back door. Karen held a pie in her hands and Dale thrust a second one in front of her and asked where he should put it.

“Oh, bless your heart,” Jane Anne said, accepting the offering. “Baking is one less thing I have to do.”

Karen took the sack of potatoes out of the cupboard and carried them to the sink. “Dale, why don’t you and Dad go see if the parade is on yet. Kids, you go, too. You don’t need to hang around the kitchen.”

“I want a cookie,” Savannah said.

Dillon promptly clamored for a cookie, too.

Jane Anne handed each a molasses cookie from the batch she’d made the day before. “Scoot,” she said, waving them toward the door.

Karen was a big help, but Jane Anne still felt exhausted by the time the last of the preparations were finished. She had hoped under the circumstances Karen would offer to have dinner at her house, but when Kris announced he was coming with the boys, she knew it wouldn’t work. Karen and Dale’s house was too small and didn’t have a dining room. At least Kris is staying with them tonight so the kids will have more time together, she thought. Not that she wouldn’t have loved to have had them stay with her, but Larry could take only so much confusion.

Savannah helped set the table, placing each fork and knife with precision. Then, at three-thirty, Kris

and the boys arrived. The cousins took stock of one another and a minute later were showing off their toys.

Kris hugged Jane Anne and asked, "How's it going?" He added, "Something sure smells good; must be the turkey," avoiding the answer he didn't want to hear.

By the time dinner was ready, the children had worked themselves up into a state of near hysteria. Dillon claimed Travis was hogging his Nintendo DS; Travis whined he was just borrowing it. Kris solved the problem by confiscating all the electronic games and putting them up on a shelf. Trent burst into tears because he hadn't done anything wrong.

"Everybody stop fussing and come to the table," Karen ordered. "Savannah made place cards so everyone knows where to sit."

"I helped," Travis said. "She doesn't know how to spell everybody's name and I do."

"Thank you, Savannah and Travis," Karen said. "Mom, sit down and let me serve."

"Who wants to say the blessing?" Jane Anne asked, sliding into her chair. She felt like she'd been standing on her feet for days, not hours.

"Me!" Trent raised his hand. "Can I, MeeMaw?"

"Of course," Jane Anne said.

The little boy clasped his hands and sang:

*"The Lord is good to me, And so I thank the Lord*

*For giving me the things I need,*

*The sun, the rain and the apple seed.*

*The Lord is good to me."*

He concluded by saying "Amen" with a satisfied nod.

Feeling tears prick her eyes, Jane Anne said, "The blessing was lovely, Trent. Thank you."

"You're entirely welcome," he replied with a wide smile that broke her heart.

Somehow, food was served and eaten. Conversation flowed as the three young adults discussed their jobs and families. Jane Anne made a comment or two when addressed, but like Larry, she preferred to listen, letting the words bathe her like a soothing balm. How good it was to have family together! The children were behaving like angels; Larry was holding up beautifully. If he repeated a question or comment, no one noticed, or if they did, they were patient in replying a second time.

The peaceful moment couldn't last. Dillon was teetering on the back legs of his chair, Travis silently daring him to lean back a bit farther.

"Dillon, sit up and stop acting silly," Dale said when he noticed. "And drink your milk, you haven't touched it."

"I'm not silly," Dillon denied, reaching for his glass. But he was back too far and, clutching the

tumbler, tipped over. Jane Anne heard the thump of his head hitting the floor and the unmistakable sound of shattered glass. The thought flashed through her mind in those few seconds that maybe the faux oak flooring they had put in when the carpet wore out two years ago hadn't been such a great idea after all. Then everyone was talking at once, leaving their seats to huddle around the screaming eight-year-old.

Kris took charge at once. "Travis, Trent, Savannah, take Poppa into the den and turn on the TV. And stay there. Karen, do we need to call 9-1-1?"

"I don't think so," Karen said. "It's only a little bump. He's had worse."

"Where's the blood coming from?" Dale asked and everyone froze except Dillon, who was still screaming.

"He landed on the broken glass," Karen said, her voice trembling now. "There's still a piece in the palm of his hand. Dillon, stop hollering and let me see." A glimpse told her the cut was shallow, the blood flow already slowing down. "I don't think it needs stitches," she said in relief. "Mom, do you have any Band Aids?"

"In the bathroom. I've got some antiseptic, too."

Dillon wound down to a snuffle, but tears still poured from his eyes, so wide and innocently trusting. "I want my Ba," he said.

Karen laughed. "Dillon, you haven't wanted your Ba in ages. I don't even know where that rag is."

"Under my pillow," Dillon said. In a louder voice, he yelled, "I want my Ba!"

Resigned, Dale said, "I'll run home and get it, soldier. Hang in there."

Jane Anne took Dillon to the guest bathroom, where she kept first aid supplies. Karen followed, muttering something about baby blankets lasting entirely too long and Dillon should have given up the tiny remnant years ago. Jane Anne let Karen wash the wound and apply Neosporin. The cut was still seeping, so she added some folded gauze and wound tape around his hand to hold the wound closed. Kris poked his head in the door to announce he had cleaned up the glass and milk. Looking grim, he about-faced and disappeared.

"He didn't have to clean up," Karen said as she gave Dillon a kiss on his tear-stained cheek. "The mess wasn't going anywhere. Dillon, let's go downstairs and watch cartoons with the other kids."

"And Poppa," Dillon said, sniffing.

When they returned to the den, though, they discovered the reason for Kris's expression. Trent was sobbing uncontrollably in his father's arms, wailing over and over, "I want my mama! I want my mama!"

"Overexcited," he mouthed to Jane Anne as she watched in consternation. Trent stopped sobbing when Dillon offered to unwrap his bandage and show him his cut. By the time Karen explained he wasn't doing any such thing, Dale was back with the scrap of blanket, which Dillon now said he didn't need. He took Ba anyway, though, and offered his treasure to Trent, who eyed it dubiously.

Then Savannah announced Sponge Bob was on, and all four children lined up on the sofa, tears and homesickness forgotten. Dale and Kris started a conversation in the corner of the room, each with a cold beer in hand. Jane Anne wondered where Dale found a store open on a holiday, and then remembered the Quik Stop between her house and his. She decided not to say anything; they needed a drink. What she needed was a nice, double martini.

Then she noticed Larry wasn't there. She ran out of the room. Karen, picking up on her mother's distress, followed. Both women stopped as they entered the dining room. The table was cleared away, each chair pushed back in place. Instead of the pottery bowl holding fake fruit, the centerpiece consisted of a straw basket filled with Jane Anne's to-do correspondence and bills. Otherwise, the scene was pristine.

Walking into the kitchen like a person in a trance, Jane Anne saw Larry at the sink, running the garbage disposal. He turned it off as soon as he became aware of her presence. "How's Trent?" he asked.

"Dillon. He's fine." She forced a smile. "What in the world have you been up to?"

"Everyone was busy, so I cleaned up." He smiled with pride. "The old man is still of some use, eh?"

Jane Anne looked at the clean counters, the bare kitchen table. "Larry? Where are the pies? I think we're ready for dessert."

His smile faded. "Pies?"

Karen opened the refrigerator and turned, her eyes bewildered. "Dad, where's the turkey and other leftovers?"

With a sickening feeling, Jane Anne knew where and how the food had disappeared. It was a wonder the disposal hadn't broken down from the turkey bones.

"Thank you, honey," Jane Anne said, her words strained as if she were trying to keep from screaming. "Why don't you go join the boys? Dale got some beer; why don't you take one of these cold Millers with you." She rationed his alcohol intake, but this was an exception.

Smiling, Larry accepted the bottle and shuffled back to the den.

"Oh, Mom," Karen said. Her eyes filled with tears. "Why haven't you told us?"

"He was so good today," Jane Anne said, sitting down, her legs having decided not to hold her. "I thought his good behavior was from being around the kids...they cheer him up, make him try harder to pay attention. Then, when we were all distracted..."

"He was trying to help." Karen smiled through her tears. "Bless his heart."

"Bless his heart," Jane Anne repeated. She had to laugh, too. "No turkey sandwiches for lunch tomorrow, I guess."

"Mom, seriously, when do you go back to Dr. Helton?"

"Next week." Jane Anne sighed. "Not that going will do any good. Dr. Helton says it's natural for a

man his age—”

“This isn’t natural. Forgetting where you put something, or fumbling for a name is natural. Putting an entire Thanksgiving meal in the garbage disposal system is not a natural result of aging.”

“I know.” Jane Anne’s shoulders sagged in defeat. “But what can anyone do? We’ve tried every medicine Dr. Helton can think of. Some made him sleep all the time, others made him agitated and quarrelsome. I don’t know what’s left to try.”

“Another doctor?”

“He’s been seeing Dr. Helton for twenty years. He feels safe with him. Changing doctors might make him worse.”

“Okay.” Karen clamped her lips into a thin line, and Jane Anne had the feeling she and Larry would be the subject of a kitchen-table discussion once the children were abed and asleep.

“Most days aren’t this bad,” she offered. “All the confusion... he can’t take it. At least he didn’t try to walk to Carroll U like he did one time. Scared me to death.”

Karen’s gaze sharpened. “You didn’t tell me about that, either.”

“I was going to call, but then I found him and didn’t have to bother you. Harriet and Beth were over and we got to talking, and he slipped out.”

“Did you tell the doctor?”

“No. I guess I should have. I will next visit, and I’ll tell him about tonight.”

“Oh, Mom.” Karen’s voice quavered, and then she looked over Jane Anne’s shoulder and laughed. “Guess what! We still have the pies.”

Jane Anne followed her gaze. “Oh Lord, I remember now, I put them on top of the fridge to get them out of the way.”

Karen retrieved the pies and put them on the table. “I’ll go see who all wants a piece, and who wants whipped cream on theirs.”

“I’ll get the plates,” Jane Anne said. She strolled to the cupboard and opened a door. To her surprise, all the plates and cups and glasses were where they belonged. It wasn’t possible Larry had washed and wiped them and put them away in the short time she and Karen had been with Dillon. Destroying the turkey and potatoes and salad had taken most of it. She opened the dishwasher. Except for their morning coffee cups and a few spoons, the racks were empty.

With an increasing feeling of hopelessness, Jane Anne started taking the soiled dishes out of the cupboard and putting them into the dishwasher. All of the silverware needed to be washed, the dirty forks and knives had contaminated everything else. Even the pots and the roasting pan had been put away greasy and crusted. She piled them in the sink, poured some detergent over them, and started running hot water.

By then, Karen had returned, had taken in the situation, and tugged her mother away from the sink. “I’ll do this. Go sit down, and tell the others they’ll have their pie in a minute.”

But Jane Anne was crying too hard to listen.

Karen enveloped her in a hug, whispering, “It’ll be all right. It’ll be all right.”

Alerted by Karen’s failure to return with the pie, Dale and Kris observed the scene from the doorway, their faces grave while Karen explained what had happened. Then no one spoke as Karen washed some dessert plates and forks, then cut the pie. Jane Anne accepted her plate and followed them into the den where Larry was watching TV with the kids, laughing with them.

He moved over to make room for her. “You cooked a great dinner,” he said.

“Thank you,” she managed.

“Are Kris and the boys staying with us tonight?”

She’d already told him the sleeping arrangements, but now she shook her head, too weary to speak.

Larry turned his attention back to the television.

A little later, the kids fussed again and Karen decided they were ready for bed. “Let’s hope they’re tired enough to go right to sleep,” she muttered as she looked for Dillon’s missing jacket. “But with my luck, they’ll get a second wind and be up until midnight.”

Jane Anne mustered a smile. “Thanks for helping, honey. The pie was wonderful.”

“No problem. I like to bake and I hardly ever get time.” She hesitated, watching Kris and Dale herd the children out the door. “Mom, you need to get Dad evaluated. I hate to say it, but he might need to be under supervised care.”

“He is under supervised care,” Jane Anne said with a flash of temper. “My care. I keep my eyes on him every minute.”

“I know,” Karen replied grimly. “And it’s taking its toll. On both of you.”

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