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But Little

The air-conditioner was going full-blast. Claudette pictured herself catching hold of Father Conroy after Mass and making a little joke about how a young priest like him might look up from the altar once in a while, just to be sure the old folks hadn't frozen to death in the pews. It was only the old folks who showed up for the eight o'clock on weekdays—two men, eight women, all of them in sweaters and jackets, like it was the middle of February, not the first Friday in August. She pictured Father's boyish grin, his arm around her shoulder. Then suddenly the nagging worry was back: *Friday, Friday*, like an insistent doorbell, getting her mind up and flustered all over again.

Friday. That boy Kyle was supposed to come over to get the chair and the two end tables from the basement. *Kyle.* Not a saint's name that she knew of, but easily remembered because she had immediately attached it to the very thing her daughter Dottie had been

sniffing out of the refrigerator at the time—"Honestly, Mother. Don't you throw anything out? What is this? Kale?" Kale with a bit of pork. It had probably been in there two weeks.

Friday. Kyle. Claudette couldn't concentrate on the epistle or the gospel, couldn't settle down to the rosary. She opened her purse and took out the little inspirational book someone had given her for Christmas. *Friday, August 23. Thought for Today: You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give your heart that you truly give.* The writing was superimposed on a washed-out photograph of two beautiful children in overalls, hand in hand. Who wrote such simple-minded things? The sort of people who'd never had to endure strangers trooping through the house and picking through their things, no doubt.

After Mass, Father Conroy winked at her, but then Nancy Malinowsky came gushing up to him with some nonsense about the Sodality breakfast. Claudette kept going, maneuvering the walker carefully down the new handicapped ramp, and out into the muggy morning air. Jim and Mitzi Widerman were waiting for her at the curb. Jim folded up the walker and put it in the back seat next to Mitzi. Then he took Claudette by the elbow while she backed herself into the front.

The Widermans had the routine down pretty well, but once they were on their way, Claudette still had to remind Jim to turn left and go down the alley. She'd been riding the two blocks to and from church with them for nearly a year, ever since the day she had fallen in the aisle coming back from Communion and everybody had made such a fuss. But it was only in the last week that she couldn't climb up the twelve front steps to her own house anymore, and had to resort to going in through the back, where there were only three.

At Claudette's back gate, Jim got out and took her by the elbow again.

"Now you go on," Claudette said, once she got herself centered on the walk. "I'll be fine."

"You sure you're OK, hon?" Jim said.

"I'm sure." She smiled hard. "You go ahead."

Jim Widerman could get under a person's skin, and she particularly hated it when he called her "hon." But by the same token it wasn't easy for a dyed-in-the-wool gentleman like him to drive away before a lady in his charge was safe inside the house. So she liked him for that—for getting it through his head that she'd prefer to go up the walk alone. Lately she liked Jim better than his wife Mitzi, who was too fluttery, and who just had to watch over her shoulder the whole time they were pulling away.

Claudette stood stock still behind the walker until she heard their car crunching around the corner, and then she was off, not exactly like a shot, but at least straight and sure—across the pavement, across the narrow yard between the roses and the weeds, which were so tall now she could almost give them a good yank, if the ground weren't so hard and dry, and if it weren't Friday with that boy coming.

The boy was Dottie's nephew, on the other side of the family. Claudette couldn't keep those people straight, but according to Dottie he had been there at one or another Christmas dinner. She remembered a couple of boys clowning around in Dottie's family room once. She remembered her son-in-law Jeff roughing up the long blond bangs of the taller boy and telling him to keep it down so the old folks could hear themselves think. She remembered the boy tossing his head, striding from the room, all hunched over and gawky. She had the feeling that one was Kyle.

In the back of her mind there was also something Dottie had told her about one of the nephews getting into trouble with the law, or maybe it was something to do with running away. But of course Dottie wasn't about to breathe a word concerning any trouble now. Because now Kyle had an apartment of his own, and needed furniture, and had the use of his father's truck. Dottie had been hounding her for ages to get the basement cleaned out. Young Kyle was nothing short of a godsend as far as Dottie was concerned.

"What about that armchair, Mother?" Dottie had said, the day she was cleaning out the medicine cabinet, stripping it of everything but the thermometer and a roll of dental floss.

Claudette pretended not to hear. "Some of that medicine is still good," she said. "I still use some of that."

"Well you shouldn't be," Dottie said. "You shouldn't be taking anything but what I've got lined up down in the kitchen. Look at this—This aspirin is from 1976, the year Emily was born." She sighed and tossed the bottle into the trash. She wiped the shelf with the brand new sponge she had brought with her, then turned to look Claudette in the eye. "What about that armchair, Mother? That big one from Nana's," she said, bold as you please, like a dog with a bone. "You could let Kyle have that, couldn't you?"

That chair had landed with them the year Claudette's mother-in-law died, back in the sixties, and had been moldering down there in the basement ever since. Claudette had once offered it to Dottie, but Dottie was into Early American in those days, and the rose upholstery, which was faded even back then, didn't suit. The chair, the two end tables, whatever else the boy might want for his apartment—there wasn't much down in the

basement that Claudette couldn't let him have. And by the time Dottie had poured the last of the cough medicine down the sink it was agreed: The boy would come over on Friday.

Friday. The phone was ringing in the kitchen, and Claudette was only on the first of the back steps. Five rings, six. But it would take her at least twenty to get up to the porch, and dig the key from her purse, and then wedge the walker in the door. The phone stopped at seven rings.

Going through the kitchen, she took stock of what she'd have to tend to before the boy arrived. First the dishes from breakfast, and from last night too, for she had fallen asleep in the chair after supper, and had gone straight up to bed at midnight. The sink and counters were piled with things to be addressed in one way or another. At the back of the drainboard, smack in the middle of the dishcloth, a small brown roach waved his antennae sluggishly—sick, no doubt, confusing his nights and days. Dottie had done some spraying.

She headed up the stairs to the bathroom, scooting step by step on her bottom as she sometimes did when she was too tired to go on her feet. She was halfway there, rounding the landing, when the phone rang again. Fifteen rings. Definitely Dottie. A small hope arrived—that the boy wouldn't be coming after all.

As soon as she finished in the bathroom, she gave Dottie a call at work.

"Well there you are," Dottie chirped. "I tried to call before. Did you just get home from church?"

"Just about," Claudette said. The small hope balanced itself atop the turbulence in her head.

Dottie went on fussing about how important it was for older people to keep hydrated, especially in hot weather. But then she got right down to business. "So," she said, drawing back on the word, taking aim. "Kyle said he'll be over today."

"Oh." The hope sank. "What time?"

"Oh I don't know, Mother, you can't pin these kids down to an exact hour. But I told him you'd be taking your nap between two and four."

"For heaven's sake, Dottie," Claudette snapped. "I don't care about any nap. He can come whenever he wants."

"I imagine that's exactly what he'll do," Dottie said, her perkiness only slightly diminished.

"That chair's pretty heavy. I just hope he can manage, because I won't be much help to him."

"He's bringing a friend, Mother. You don't have to worry about a thing. All you have to do is let them in."

"Well, I can certainly do that much."

Dottie had to get off the phone then. "And please, Mother," she said, just before she hung up, "there is absolutely no reason for you to go down in the basement."

One step at a time, standing up this time, Claudette made her way back down to the living room and the walker propped by the newel post. She took in the mess of the living room—a couple day's worth of newspapers on the floor, the mail spread out on the couch, enough dirty dishes on the ottoman and the T.V. table to necessitate three trips back and forth to the kitchen. And the boy could be coming any minute.

She made it to the kitchen, and was loading the dishpan, when it occurred to her that she could send those boys straight around back to the basement door. She left the dishes to soak and made herself some instant tea, just half a glass, so it wouldn't slosh on the way into the living room and so she wouldn't have to go back up to the bathroom any time soon. She turned on the T.V.—*The Price is Right*—settled down in the recliner, dozed off, and dreamed she had just won an upright freezer and a trip to Aruba. When she woke up, Bob Barker was reprimanding a silly woman in tight pants because the wheel hadn't gone all the way round. Claudette watched the wheel go around again and land on sixty cents.

The doorbell rang. Had she heard it ringing earlier, back in Aruba? Before she had a chance to clear her head, there was a rattling knock on the storm door.

"Coming," she called. "Who is it?"

"It's Kyle." The voice was deeper than she'd expected.

She had a little trouble unlocking the storm door, and meanwhile he backed away to the edge of the porch, as though she might come toppling through—a tall young man, his face shaded by a baseball cap. She could see the smile at least, above the puny blonde beard.

"Come on in," she said.

It wasn't until he had stepped past her and was standing there in the living room, wiping his palms on the back of his baggy shorts, looking around quickly, that she remembered she had meant to have him come in through the basement. His gaze settled on the T.V., where the silly woman was dancing around Bob Barker like a ninny.

"I meant to tell you to park in the alley," she said. "That way you can go straight into the basement."

"OK," he said. "I'll move the truck around."

“Good.”

But suddenly he murmured, “Excuse me,” and strode right past her, through the living room and into the dining room, where he pushed the curtains aside to peer out the window. “I just want to see what your yard looks like,” he said. “I mean, so I’ll know where to park. These rowhouses all look alike.”

Surely he’d seen the commode in the corner of the dining room, because that thing was not completely hidden by the screen they had rigged up, no matter what Dottie said. Claudette had only used the commode once—more or less an emergency. She had rinsed out the pail four times.

“Look for the white awning,” she said. “And the house number is painted on the trash can—1725.”

“OK,” he said, ducking his head, heading out the front door.

Was his friend waiting in the truck?

As she was making her way into the kitchen the phone rang—Dottie of course.

“I can’t talk now,” Claudette said. “That boy is here and I’ve got to open the door for him.”

“Kyle? Oh good. Put him on the phone.”

“Well he’s moving the truck around back right now.”

“O.K. I’ll wait.”

When Claudette opened the back door she found him on the back porch already, sitting patiently on the glider, as though he hadn’t expected to see her for a while.

“Your Aunt Dottie’s on the phone,” she said through the screen door.

She undid the latch, and he squeezed past her again. Two strides, and he was on the phone.

"Hi Aunt Dottie," he said, all seriousness. "OK, I will." At one point he glanced over at Claudette, then quickly looked down. "OK," he said two or three more times, before he hung up.

Claudette smiled at him.

He smiled back. "I guess I'll go on down and unlock the door for myself," he said, wiping his hands on his shorts again. "So you don't have to do the stairs and all."

Before she could reply, before she could move the mop aside, or her apron, which was hanging over the knob, the frayed strings gathering up dust balls, he wrenched the door open and lurched down the basement stairs.

"Here," she called after him. "Let's turn on the light."

"Oh sure." He bounded back up, past the cans of soup and tomato sauce lining the steps. "Thanks," he said, flipping the switch.

"Are you by yourself?" she called down the stairs.

He didn't answer.

She went back to the screen door and looked out at the pick-up truck parked in the alley. There was no one sitting in it, no one waiting in the yard. She heard the basement door open, and there he was, carrying the first of the end tables out to the truck—over his head, effortlessly, as though it were made of cardboard. In no time he had the other table out there too. She watched him maneuver them side by side in the back of the truck. She went back to the stairwell and listened. He was dragging the chair from the front toward the back. Then he was pushing something else around, probably one of those plastic storage things Dottie

had re-packed the china in, after the tubs overflowed and the bottoms of the old boxes rotted out.

"Is everything all right down there?" she called. "Do you need any help?"

"No thanks," he called up. "I'm just clearing a path here."

"Do you think you can manage by yourself? That chair's heavy."

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Dottie said you were bringing a friend."

"Oh him . . ." Something jingled—He was moving that old floor lamp with the pull chain. "He didn't show up."

It was past the time she usually fixed herself a little something for lunch, and her knees were beginning to go rubbery. She sat down at the kitchen table and ate the other half of the banana from breakfast. She heard more scraping of the chair, and then nothing. She waited a long time, a good three minutes, and not a sound from him. At last she pulled herself up and went over to the stairwell.

"Kyle?" she called, keeping her voice as casual as she could.

He didn't answer right away, but came around and stood at the foot of the stairs.

"It won't fit through the door," he said.

Of course it would, because it had fit through just fine on the way in, but something in his face—panic almost—made her hold her tongue. He had taken off the baseball cap. His thin blonde hair was matted against his head with perspiration.

"Well," she said. "I'm sure there's a way. How about if I take a look?" She was already on her way, sidestepping down, one-two, one-two.

"No. No really, I'll get it. Aunt Dottie said you shouldn't come down the stairs."

"Nonsense, " she said. "I come down here all the time to do the laundry. As a matter of fact, I have some things I was just about to throw in the machine anyway." It was a lie. All the laundry was supposed to go to the cleaners now, even the sheets and towels. But suddenly it occurred to her that it might be the truth. She remembered washing a good linen tablecloth and some pillowcases, either yesterday or the day before. She had meant to hang them outside on the line to dry. She hoped they hadn't gotten mildewed. Dottie would have a fit if she found out.

"Really, you shouldn't come down," Kyle said. He was standing with one hand pressed to the wall and the other gripping the banister, as though he were prepared to break her fall. He shook his head. He looked at the floor. "Aunt Dottie is going to kill me."

"She isn't going to do anything of the sort." She was already a third of the way down, taking it slow. "But I can see where you might be worried about it. Besides, who died and left her boss?"

He laughed—such a pleasant laugh. When she finally cleared the last step and reached out for her old walker, the one she called her "basement walker," she let herself hold onto his arm.

"Now let's see what we've got here," she said, and they set off past the laundry tubs and toward the light.

He had been smart enough to turn the chair on its side, but the problem was apparent at once. It was that damned railing. Dottie had hired a carpenter to put it in last spring, after Claudette had had the fall. It extended clear to the porch supports. There was no way the boy could get clear of that.

"See what I mean?" he said, giving the chair a shake to show just how tight a situation it was.

"I do indeed," she said.

They stood side by side for a moment, staring into the torn undersides of the chair, at the cobwebs and the little balls of spider eggs.

"If you could clear that railing," she said, "you wouldn't have any trouble at all."

"I know." He wiped his forehead with the back of his arm. "No way I'm going to get this baby out."

Apparently it was no small defeat for him. He was tall, but he really didn't have a whole lot of brawn to him. He wrestled the chair back into the basement, and dropped it heavily on its feet. "It's a really nice chair," he said.

"You think so?" She was surprised he had taken a liking to a chair so pink and overstuffed.

"Yeah. It'll look good with the couch I got at Goodwill."

"Here," she said. "Let me sit down and think this over. Two heads are better than one." She backed herself up to the chair, planted her feet apart, and dropped down. She had forgotten what a comfortable chair it was—a little lumpy in the seat cushion maybe, but good and firm against the back.

"You're right," she said. "It is a nice chair."

He sat on the floor with his back to the washing machine, hugging his knees to his chest. She could see right up those baggy shorts, clear to his rear end.

"We could take the railing off," she said, yanking her skirt over the thigh-highs, which had worked their way down as usual.

"I don't think I should do that," he said.

"It's just a few screws."

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe I should call my father."

The father. Just like that the whole picture flickered into focus. The father would be Jeff's brother Dan—the one who had made the drunken speech at Dottie's wedding, the thick-necked, swaggering one who now had the big construction business. And also coming into focus was something Dottie had said once about the father throwing the son out of the house. Was it drugs? Alcohol? That part didn't come back so quickly, but she was certain the father was Dan, and the son was Kyle, this boy with the puny beard who was leaning against her washing machine, staring at his beat-up tennis shoes.

"You don't really want to do that, do you?" she said.

He looked up and gave a wry smile. "No."

She patted the arms of the chair. They were a little worn, but really they weren't in such bad shape. "So you have a place of your own now?" she asked.

"Yeah. Downtown. Near the Art Institute. I go to school there."

"Well good for you. Are you a painter?"

"Not really," he said, smiling, looking back at the shoes. "I'm more into drawing. Cartoons, actually."

"Like in the funny papers?"

"I wish."

"Big money in that I bet." She worked herself to the edge of the seat, grabbed hold of the walker again. "Look here," she said. "There's got to be a screw driver on that workbench over there. See if you can find one. I'm more interested in getting this chair out

of here than I am in that damned railing." She put out a hand and he gave her a good firm pull. But she was woozy, and tottered backwards a bit.

"You OK?" he asked.

"I'm OK." She regretted not taking a swig of orange juice with the banana, not remembering to drink that half glass of instant tea. Low blood sugar, that's what it was. She was seeing those little sparkles, like she might faint. She let go of his hand and plopped back down in the chair.

"Kyle," she said. "Run up there to the kitchen and pour us a glass of orange juice. I think I'm a little low on fuel here."

"Sure." He took off running. She hoped he wouldn't panic and do something stupid, like call Dottie or his parents. But in a moment he was back, handing her a big tumbler of orange juice.

"Don't you want something to drink yourself?" she said.

"I'll get something later. Did you want ice in that? You look a little over-heated."

"No, this is fine." She took a couple swallows and wiped her mouth. She was perspiring. "You go find that screw driver now," she said, leaning back, "and I'll just rest here a while."

"I don't think we should get into that right now," he said. "I can come back later, some other day. It's too hot today. We gotta get you back upstairs, don't you think?"

The sparkles returned for a moment, then faded. The boy was right: Forget the chair. The bigger project was going to be getting up those basement stairs.

"How many stairs do you have?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Your new apartment—how many flights do you have to go up?"

"Oh. None. I mean I'm on the fourth floor, but there's an elevator."

An elevator. That's what Dottie had been pushing for. *Maplecrest. St. Anne's Village*. Those retirement places with everything connected by halls and elevators—a chapel, a doctor's office, a drugstore, a dining room. You never even had to go outside.

The phone rang upstairs. He looked at her, and she rolled her eyes in reply. "We don't want to answer that," she said.

"Aunt Dottie?"

"Count the rings. She's usually fifteen."

Fifteen rings exactly. He laughed, and shook his head.

"All right," she said. "I'm ready." She gave him both hands, and he pulled her to her feet in perfect form. They headed back the way they had come, past all of Dottie's new storage boxes, and a whole lot of other stuff somebody was going to have to move out some day.

"I want you to have that chair, Kyle," she said, when they reached the foot of the stairs. "Even if you have to take the door off, I want you to have that chair. That and anything else you want down here."

"Thanks," he said. "Maybe tomorrow. I'll figure something out, and I'll come back tomorrow. I'll bring my friend and we can probably get it up the stairs and through the kitchen."

"Sure. I hadn't thought of that. You come back tomorrow and we'll do it right." She set the walker aside, and grabbed hold of the railing. The sparkles came back with a

vengeance. She was practically blinded by them. She turned herself around, very slowly, and sat down on the steps.

"This isn't exactly lady-like," she said, "but unless you want to carry me up on your back, it's the only way to go."

"That's OK." He pulled his cap back on, down over his eyes. "I've seen a lot worse. At least you're sober."

"Well, I hadn't thought about it that way," she said. "But you've got a point there. I am certainly sober."

"You want another sip of your fuel?"

"No." She gulped down a little air, and belched it back as quietly as she could. "The fuel isn't sitting too well at the moment."

"That bad, huh?"

"That bad." She leaned her cheek against the cool wall and closed her eyes.

"You want me to call Aunt Dottie or something?"

"No. I'll be all right."

He climbed past her then, and sat down on the step above her. She could feel his bare legs against her back—cool and damp, like the wall.

"Come on," he said after a while. "We can do this." He held her under the arms and gave a little boost. She gave a little push of the legs. They made three steps, resting at each one. In between she asked questions—about his school, about the family—but after awhile they fell into a silent rhythm, the way it always is with heavy work. When they reached the top, he pulled her easily to her feet. The sparkles were gone. And the nausea too.

The phone rang.

"You better get that," she said, grabbing hold of the walker. "Next thing you know she'll have the neighbors beating the door down."

He sprang away and answered before the third ring. "Hi, Aunt Dottie . . . Oh, I guess she was busy or something. Yeah, everything's fine. You want me to get her over to the phone? . . . OK . . . OK, I'll tell her."

He hung up. He gave her a sly smile. "Aunt Dottie said you should call her. When you get up from your nap."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," she said, heading for the living room. "That girl is going to drive me crazy."

"She's just worried, that's all," he said. "She's not so bad, really."

"I know. And thank you, Kyle. You're a nice boy."

He ducked his head, but she could tell he didn't mind her calling him a boy.

"This place is a real mess, isn't it?" she said, carefully backing down into the recliner.

He looked around and shrugged. "I don't know. It doesn't look so bad to me. You ought to see my place."

"Maybe some day I will. You say you have an elevator?"

"Yeah. You could get up easy. And maybe by then I'll have that chair all ready for you."

It was a surprisingly pleasant thought. She could almost picture it. "You'll have that chair," she said, closing her eyes. "You're going to come and get it tomorrow."

She felt him moving away. When she opened her eyes again, he was out in the dining room, turning on the floor fan, adjusting it to blow straight in her direction.

"What day is tomorrow?" she called.

"Saturday."

She closed her eyes again. *Saturday*. It had a ring to it. Like she'd just won a prize—a freezer, a vacation to Aruba, a ride in a smooth and soundless elevator, clear to the top.