

Passing
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Best of ~ Fiction

The dim, graying slab of the church's exterior back wall is as uninviting as the dingy hotel room she has just left. The sight takes her off guard. Surely the church was not always so ugly, she thinks. She remembers a little white building bedecked with Christmas garlands or Easter banners, filled to the brim with the smiling faithful who raised her with care and crushed her with expectations. She remembers coming here with Arnold at least once on a Halloween night to splatter this wall with old eggs – his idea, of course – both of them confident in the knowledge that they were loved and would be forgiven. The fading edifice before her seems a decaying ghost of the structure that once offered that love.

She pulls her car into a space near the door and climbs out into the bitter wind of the February afternoon, which seizes the tails of her suit jacket and flings them out wildly behind her. She pulls anxiously at her tie. She ought to have had Joe refresh her memory and skills in tie management before she left town. As in most things, her son maintains perfect correctness in his dress, so professional these days since his promotion. He has grown into a truly handsome man, she reflects, though she had always known he would. She relishes a brief fantasy of showing him off to the assemblage, boasting of his academic accomplishments, his professional success, his beautiful wife and precious baby daughter. Then she pulls at her tie again and casts the vision away. She is more relieved than sorry that Joe is not here. Her day will be difficult enough without the added trouble of shepherding her only son through the ranks of relatives whom, after all, she and Joe have not seen in over a decade for a reason.

Her tie finally wrestled into place, she mounts the crumbling back steps with more bravado than her feelings merit. The decrepit condition of the church seems to offer a grim promise that she will

find the intervening years have left her relatives in a similar state of erosion. Then again, she is no spring chicken herself. Her back aches from the unfamiliar hotel bed as it would never have done in younger days, a pang almost stronger than the anxiety that knots her stomach. Her hand, to her irritation, trembles slightly as she lays it on the rusting doorknob to which she once tied Arnold's loose tooth. She tightens her grip and pushes the door forcefully open.

The back door opens directly onto the fellowship hall. As badly lit and cheerily painted as she remembers it, the old room with its colorful walls seems an inappropriate venue for the sea of black attire that meets her eyes. There are far more people here than she expected, filling the room almost to capacity. She had not thought Arnold had so many friends. Then she feels guilty over the supposition. She of all people should know better than to make assumptions of any kind.

“Joseph!” Although she has braced herself for it, practiced it in the mirror of her hotel room for half an hour the night before, trying to reacquaint herself with the empty, foreign syllables, the name falls on her ears like the cold water of the creek where she and Arnold used to swim. She suppresses a shiver.

The voice sounds again. “Joseph, you're here.” Marilyn parts the waters of the black sea, moving swiftly through the ranks that draw respectfully back at the passing of the bereaved woman. Marilyn reaches her and seizes both her hands with surprising strength. “It's good to see you.”

“Hello, Lynn.” She lets go of Marilyn's hands and, brotherly, folds her in a hug instead, not too tight. “How are you holding up?”

“I'm... doing better.” Marilyn draws back and speaks evenly. The years have diminished both her sturdy bearing and the gleaming blondness of her tightly curled hair. “How are you, Joseph?”

She blinks, drawing up an answer from her well-rehearsed catalog of lines. “I'm well.”

“And Joe? He must be... my goodness, is he thirty?”

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“He’s thirty-one.” She nods, feeling pride suffuse her face and not bothering to douse it in humility. “He’s doing very, very well. A fine young man.”

“You must be proud of him.” Marilyn’s smile creases her eyes without lessening their tiredness.

“He has a little girl.” She bites her lip. She had determined not to discuss this, yet grandmotherly pride, it seems, is stronger than her resolution.

“Does he?” Marilyn’s interest is immediate and keen. “How old is she? What’s her name?”

“She’ll be two in October,” she says. “Her name is Elly.” For a moment she hopes Marilyn will not make the connection, but then Marilyn nods sympathetically.

“After Elaine, of course,” Marilyn says. “That’s beautiful. I’m sure Elaine would have loved her.”

As if she needs a reminder of Elaine’s strongest characteristic. Elaine would have loved little Elly with all the strength of devotion she lavished on Joe and on his erstwhile father. Elaine would be angry, she thinks, to see her here now. *What are you doing?* she would demand. *How dare you remake yourself for these people?* But Elaine always liked Marilyn. She remembers Marilyn standing up among the ranks of Elaine’s bridesmaids on their wedding day, smiling with deepest goodwill at the beautiful bride her notoriously sissified brother-in-law had astonishingly managed to ensnare. She thinks of the reception, of Arnold’s best man speech with its string of crude jokes about brother Joseph’s probable impending failure to do his lovely new wife justice in bed. He was not wrong, either, she reflects with sudden color. The fact that they managed to produce Joe within the first year of their marriage still astonishes her now as much as it did thirty-one years ago. There was even a time, briefly, when she doubted her own paternity, spurred by Arnold’s dark insinuations that baby Joe looked nothing like his father. Then again, by that time Arnold had two daughters to his name and a financial reality that encouraged no further children. To lack a son and heir

after two attempts while his pansy of a brother scored a male first-born in perfect health must have galled Arnold.

She realizes that Marilyn is speaking, has probably been speaking for some time. “Charity will be eight next month and Grace just turned four. They’re here somewhere with Donna.”

“Yes, how are Donna and Diana?” She asks after her nieces with especial warmth to make up for her slip in attention.

“Donna’s right over there.” Marilyn points toward a corner, where her tall, blond daughter stands in conversation with a little knot of somber-faced women, a child in black clinging to her leg.

“That must be Grace,” she says.

Marilyn nods. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

Privately she thinks that Grace looks a bit inclined toward scrawniness, a trait shared by her mother and aunt, who inherited it from no one knew where. Not from Marilyn, and surely not from Arnold, a beefy football player in high school who filled out further into corpulence as the years progressed. She wonders what he looked like this time last week, when he was still living, breathing, and probably swearing at everyone in sight. Has it been twelve years since she last saw him? He came to Elaine’s funeral, slightly hungover, she remembers, and uncharacteristically let Marilyn do all the talking. It seems a lifetime since then.

“I’ll go over and say hello,” she says. She squeezes Marilyn’s hand with what she realizes too late is a distinctly womanly air of compassion. “I’ll see you later, Lynn.”

She tightens her hand into a fist and drops it to her side as Marilyn smiles, unfazed, and drifts away. She is determined not to repeat her mistake. Marilyn knew her in the days when she was widely regarded as the local sissy boy; from Marilyn’s perspective, a touch of femininity in her is no surprise. With others she had better be more careful.

“Hello, Donna.” She addresses her eldest niece with resignation, prepared for frivolous prattle. Young Donna was a flighty, feather-headed type, and she doubts if at thirty-four she has

much changed.

“Uncle Joseph.” Donna turns away from the circle of unfamiliar women with whom she has been conversing and gives her the weakest hug she has ever received, Elaine’s feeble embraces in the last months of her illness notwithstanding. “You came.” Donna sounds surprised. The years seem to have robbed her voice of its flirtatious edge.

“Of course I did.” She says it firmly, as if she had not spent hours considering and reconsidering her choices, talking her plan over with Joe and Melanie, second- and third-guessing herself at every turn. She stands solidly before her niece, a respectable picture of a loving brother come to pay his last respects.

“We didn’t think you would.” Donna’s faint attempt at a smile has already faded away completely. Her eyes, if possible, are more tired than her mother’s. “Actually we didn’t think anyone would come.”

“There seems to be quite a crowd.” She glances around the room, which reminds her of a nest of insects with its black-clad occupants quietly buzzing to one another.

“These are Mom’s friends,” Donna says, “mostly people from the church. Mom’s got a lot of friends.”

“And she has you.” She thinks of Joe, sitting up late by her side with Elaine at the hospital, holding her against his shoulder as they both cried, moving her with him to California, fiercely staring down anyone who spoke against her new appearance, taking time off work to look after her following her surgeries, retraining himself in an impressively short amount of time to use her new name.

Donna is frowning at her with something almost like resentment. “Yes,” Donna says. “She always has me.”

She decides to change the subject. “And this is Grace?” She looks down at the child, who has retreated behind her mother at the approach of a strange man.

“Yes. Grace, say hello to your great-uncle, Joseph.” Donna grabs her child’s arm and pulls her none too gently forward.

“Hello, Grace.” She employs the same warm tone she uses for baby Elly. The child gazes up at her in confusion. She inwardly curses her carelessness and deliberately drops her voice lower into her chest as she continues. “How old are you, sweetie?”

Grace says nothing.

“Uncle Joseph asked you a question.” Donna gives her daughter’s arm a brisk little shake. The child holds up one hand, four fingers.

“You’re four? My goodness, you’re getting to be such a big girl.” She speaks as if she has known Grace from infancy, rather than only now meeting her for the first time. Grace shrinks further back against her mother.

She changes the topic again. “Is Diana here?” She always enjoyed her role as favorite uncle to Donna’s younger sister, a bright, energetic, ambitious young thing just a few months older than Joe. Like Joe, Diana ventured boldly into the uncharted territory of college, she suspects against Arnold’s wishes. She remembers those discussions in her own childhood home as high school drew to a close: her unrealized but often spoken dream of attending college herself, Arnold’s ready scoff of scorn. Arnold’s more ambitious daughter is in fact the only member of the family with whom she has maintained any contact, albeit limited, in the last decade.

“Diana isn’t coming.” Donna speaks sharply as Grace vanishes entirely behind her once again.

“She couldn’t make it?”

“She wouldn’t.” Donna’s face is stony. “We haven’t seen her in years. She lives out in New England, I think. She sent Mom a Christmas card from there once about five years ago.”

“Does she not know what’s happened?” She cannot imagine the horror of no one bothering to tell Joe if she died. She thinks guiltily of her own little stash of Diana’s annual Christmas cards, in most recent years charmingly designed by Diana’s photographer boyfriend.

“Mom sent a letter to the Christmas card address. We

never heard back.” Donna shrugs indifferently. “She’s too good for us here. She went to law school, you know. Probably lives in a penthouse now.”

She opts to ignore the taut thread of bitterness running tangibly through Donna’s words. “Well, I’m sorry to miss her.” She fumbles for something consoling to say. Donna’s face forbids comfort.

“It’s almost three o’clock. The service will be starting soon,” Donna says. “I’m going to the sanctuary.”

“I’ll see you later, Donna.” She watches her niece retreat, little Grace’s arm firmly in her grip. She thinks suddenly of her own long-dead mother, so much gentler than Donna in some ways, in others so much harsher. Her mother never had time for her flamboyance or for Arnold’s bullheadedness, and certainly not for mediating between her increasingly polarized sons as they grew older. What would her mother say if she could have seen them both in the last few years? Of which one, if either, would she be proud?

The crowd around her is beginning to thin, moving out of the fellowship hall to take up their positions in the sanctuary, where Arnold’s life is to be commemorated. What will they talk about, she wonders? Will someone speak of his football prowess, of how he broke his leg playing and never walked quite right again? Will someone talk about the trouble he got into, the brushes with the law in high school and after? Will someone tell the story of his career in the plant, of his disagreeable interactions with coworkers and his hours upon hours of overtime? Will Marilynn admit to the noisy fights, the drunken verbal abuse, the binges that sometimes left him missing in action for days? Will anyone remember that once he was a little boy of four, no bigger than Grace, who used to play with toy trucks with his big brother in the dirt of their backyard?

Lost in her thoughts, she is almost alone in the fellowship hall when the back door opens. The young woman in the doorway is professionally dressed but lightly ruffled with travel. She stands uncommittedly in the cool shaft of light from outside, glancing with

uncertainty around the room. It has been more than a decade since she saw her, but her niece's self-assured profile is unmistakable.

She moves toward the newcomer. "Hello, Diana."

"Uncle Joseph." Diana's face brightens at once as she folds her favorite uncle in a hug. "Where is everyone?"

"They've gone into the sanctuary. The service is about to start."

"I didn't mean to be so late." Diana looks remorseful. "There was some trouble about getting a car at the airport." Diana frowns at her, worried. "Have they been talking about me?" She shakes her head, not waiting for the answer. "Of course they have."

"How are you?" She gives her tone all the gentleness she can. She suspects no one else will be gentle to Diana today.

"I'm doing really well," Diana says. She sounds as if she means it.

"Still living in New England?"

"That's right. I actually just started working for a private firm in Boston."

"That's wonderful." Arnold never thought much of lawyers, she remembers. "And how is Kyle?" She has never met Diana's boyfriend, but the domestic glow beneath Diana's professionalism bears witness to his influence.

Diana glances around, making sure no one is listening. The last of the stragglers are exiting the fellowship hall. "He's great," she says. "We're actually getting married in the spring."

"Congratulations." She smiles broadly.

Diana does not smile back. "I'd be glad if you didn't tell anyone," Diana says. "I don't think the family would – well, I shouldn't say that."

"You say whatever you want, sweetheart." The last word falls unthinkingly from her lips and immediately she wants to swallow it back. She braces herself, waiting for Diana's quizzical frown, a blink of surprise, any sign that her niece is perturbed. Instead, Diana's tense mouth eases into a grateful smile.

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“Thank you, Uncle Joseph.” Then Diana gives herself a little shake and speaks briskly. “I don’t mean to speak ill of Dad, though, I really don’t. I’m not here to make trouble. Dad gave me existence. The least I can give back is the respect of coming to his funeral.”

There seems nothing to say to this. She nods supportively instead.

“It’s funny, you know,” Diana goes on. “I got Mom’s letter saying that Dad had passed away. I just kept thinking about it on the plane. Why do we say that? ‘Pass’ is such a common, ordinary sort of word. I mean, Dad passed footballs and he passed gas. He passed judgement on everybody, especially me, and he passed his time drinking and being miserable. ‘Pass away’ makes this sound just like another ordinary little thing, nothing special. And I guess it is.” She shrugs. “I imagine they’ll talk in there about him being in a better place and all that sort of thing, for Mom’s sake, but Dad didn’t believe any of that. I remember when I was in high school and I used to get upset about living in this little town and not feeling like I had any opportunities, he used to say, ‘Who cares? Life’s just a phase we’re passing through. It’ll be over sooner or later.’ Well, now it’s over, and I guess he’s happier than before. I hope so.” Diana looks at her with eyes that plead for absolution. “You see why I had to leave,” she says. “I loved my dad, I really did. But you can’t live with them, these people who are just passing. You have to go out and find your life.”

She reaches out and lays a hand on her niece’s arm, offering support as Diana appears suddenly about to sway. “Oh, sweetheart,” she says. The word comes easily now. “I’m so proud of you.” Elaine would be proud of her, she thinks.

“I don’t want to go in there.” The fervor is gone from Diana’s voice, fading into a thin, weary whisper. “I don’t want to see all their faces looking at me. It’s all too –” Diana breaks off as words seem to abandon her.

She puts her arm around Diana. “It’s alright,” she murmurs, as if her niece were a child. “It will be alright.” She squeezes her shoulder, a promise of solidarity. She sees the pair of them

three hours from now at a little restaurant table in the next town, confiding their respective stories of finding their lives. She sees Arnold throwing eggs at the church wall, Arnold scoffing at the idea of college, Arnold drinking his way into his grave. How do they live, these people who are just passing?

She removes her arm from around Diana's shoulders and takes her niece gently by the elbow. She draws herself up, feels Diana take in a deep breath. "Come on, my dear. Let's pay our respects to your father."

They move down the hallway together in measured steps, heads held high. Walking through the sanctuary door, Diana's arm still tightly in her clasp, she sees the black-clad crowd around them only as a haze, a temporary fog that passes quickly and leaves her to gaze ahead unhindered across the wide-open expanse of days to come.