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BACK TO THE FAMILY

There must have been something in her face, Elizabeth thought, that prompted the usher to ask if she belonged with the family. Her tweed suit could hardly be taken for mourning. It might be the violets, she reflected. She had pinned a small corsage, bought from a street vendor, to her lapel, because Ernest had loved violets.

"Just a friend," she told the usher. "Anywhere will do."

Feeling a trifle self-conscious now, because of the question, she followed him down a side aisle to a pew well behind the several roped-off pews for the next of kin. "This will be all right, thank you," she said, when he would have moved on. She seated herself at the end of the row, thinking of a quick departure when the service had ended.

Why had she added the bit about being "just a friend?" she wondered. Certainly all of these were friends. The nave was already almost filled. With people who looked to be from all walks of life, it occurred to her, not just the "first families." They had come here, surely, because they loved Ernest, as she herself did. She judged several to be

employees of his company, men and women dressed neatly and appropriately for the rites, but not grandly. She had seen many small, used-looking cars in the parking lot among the Lincolns, the Cadillacs and the Mercedeses. The Lindley plant, the newspaper had reported, would be closed for the services.

It wasn't until after she was seated that Elizabeth saw that the inscription below the stained glass window beside which she sat read: IN MEMORY OF SARAH CHAUCER LINDLEY. That would be Ernest's mother, who had been gone for a quarter of a century.

She slipped her stole off her shoulders and held it in her lap, her gloved hands clasped together beneath the rich fur. Feeling its warmth, she recalled vividly the day Ernest had brought it to her, on her recent birthday. The stole was the only substantial gift she had ever accepted from him, if you discounted the use of the beach house, that was in his name and would go, as it should, to the family. Elizabeth had lived in the house as a non-paying "guest" these late years. Ernest had stubbornly declined a rental fee. Much as she loved the place, Elizabeth had already packed most of her belongings, feeling that she must leave it at the earliest possible moment.

The members of the family were coming in now, escorted by an attendant in secular garb. The custom in this church, an elegant, if very old institution, was not to segregate the so-called "mourners" to a private room as was done in commercial parlors but to seat them with the audience. The widow,

Doris Lindley, was accompanied by her two tall sons, George and Carl. The daughter, Margaret, the daughters-in-law, the grandchildren had already been seated, as had other relatives, cousins, Elizabeth supposed, nieces and nephews, people who were a part of Ernest's life. Elizabeth had met none of them, but Ernest had talked of them to her. One, an elderly, frail-looking man on a cane, Elizabeth took to be his brother Jeff, who lived in Michigan.

Aside from Carl, the youngest son, it was the grandchildren who had interested Elizabeth most. She had gone with Ernest a few times to select gifts for the grandchildren from the shop down the beach. She had made, at his request, a marionette for George's little daughter, Frances. She would be the one with the long, dark hair, Elizabeth guessed. She wished the child would turn around so that she could see her face.

"Frances is one who won't spoil easily," Ernest had said. "She's like my mother." He had talked a good deal to Elizabeth about his mother, of whom he had been very fond.

"They say his estate comes to several million," the woman next to Elizabeth whispered to her. "And he made it all with his own hands. He's leaving them plenty, whether they deserve it or not."

When Elizabeth failed to respond, the woman turned to confide in her companion on the other side.

For a moment Elizabeth saw Ernest plainly as he

had looked in life, heard his quick step, his warm laugh. And then her mind tried, vainly, to encompass a future without his compensation, the pleasure of his companionship as she had known it, and it was as though a bleak wind crept down the aisles of the great stone church. She shivered slightly and drew the stole about her shoulders again.

As the lights were dimmed and the soft strains from the organ loft filled the nave, Elizabeth's eyes, which she had closed at the onslaught of her fresh realization of bereavement, opened and moved across the wall of flowers that banked the sanctuary and spilled into the side aisles. The abundance of floral offerings would have embarrassed Ernest, she reflected, seeing him once more. He had disliked extravagance in any form, including superlatives in speech and writing. A modest and unassuming man, with simple tastes, he would have deplored the redundancy of the tributes, especially from those he knew could ill afford the cost.

Striving, deliberately, to glean some comfort from her reminiscence as she listened to the music, Elizabeth told herself that Ernest had met his fate with quiet acceptance and typical grace. "I've had a good life," he had said when it became evident that the by-pass surgery was something less than the miracle they had hoped for. "I don't want anyone mourning me when I'm gone." The words had helped her during these three days since his sudden, unexpected death. She had not, of course, seen him since his recent surgery. His sons, some

members of his family, had sat with him around the clock.

"I'm glad to be going first," he had said to Elizabeth, earlier, following a visit to his doctor, who was his friend, and frank in his diagnosis. "I don't think I could do without you, Elizabeth."

"I don't see how I could get along without you, either," she had told him. "So let's not talk about it." She had never once doubted his devotion to her. It was the only time the subject had come up directly between them. The end, which, fortunately, had come "in his sleep," as the saying went, had been a shock to her, as well, she knew, as to his family and to the community.

Beyond leaving the house, Elizabeth had no plans concerning her own living style. She had called Ernest's attorney to say she was leaving. She had no notion how much the family knew about her residence there. They had other rental properties that the attorney saw to. He had said when she called, "There's no hurry you know. Stay as long as you like. Ernest would want you to stay, I am sure. Stay, at least, until you can make satisfactory arrangements."

"I have thanks," she told him, though she really had no notion as to where she would go. She had made warm friends among the shore dwellers, just as Ernest had. She felt accepted there.

Ernest's own bachelor abode was some distance down the peninsula. So far as Elizabeth knew, his wife, Doris,

never visited him there. One characteristic she especially honored in him was the fact that he never at any time had spoken a word in criticism of Doris to her. He had said once that the fog and the salt air bothered his wife's sinuses, and that he on the other hand, found the dampness to his liking. He had lived alone here, semi-retired, for some time before he and Elizabeth met.

There had never been any question of a divorce, so far as Elizabeth knew. Neither Ernest nor Elizabeth had seen any need for it. A Lindley divorce would have created a front-page sensation that would have hurt both his children and hers, as well as Doris, and there had seemed no necessity.

Why had she come to the services, Elizabeth asked herself now. She considered funerals, as she did most memorial celebrations, ordeals for survivors, of whom she herself was, of course, not one in the usual parlance. Her sister Laura had attempted to dissuade Elizabeth from attending. "It doesn't look... well, quite decent, Beth."

The remark had disturbed Elizabeth. She had been conventionally raised, as Laura had. But there had been that about her relationship with Ernest that seemed to her to differ from the merely clandestine. Were it possible, she thought, she would like to express her sympathy to such of the family as she felt was genuinely grieving, to Carl, to Ernest's grandchildren, especially to little Frances, who had commenced to

sob softly when the music started. Elizabeth's own throat had constricted, listening.

The service had commenced. The opening of "The Litany for the Dead" was being read by the young vicar. The words, filled with dignity and meaning as well as beauty, were a solace in their own way if you concentrated on them. The sun, streaming through the stained windows, the mellow tones of the organ provided accompaniment. When the Litany was finished, a young male voice in the choir loft began the hymn, LEAD, KINDLY LIGHT, one of Elizabeth's favorites, and she tried to attend to the words.

Conscious all at once of looking directly at the back of Doris Lindley's crepe-draped head, she dropped her eyes with a feeling of delict. Today was the first time she had seen Ernest's wife in person, though her photo appeared often in the social section of the newspaper, where she looked remarkably youthful. Her good works, her position as senior adviser to the Junior League, were much publicized, as were the sons' and daughter's contribution in the town.

Elizabeth's own status, she was well aware, was that of "the other woman." Laura had reminded her of this. Her relationship with Ernest had been, as she saw it and as she was sure he saw it, a fulfillment of a need in both of which both had become slowly conscious, an alleviation of aloneness. The friendship had become love before they hardly realized.

I must not judge her, Elizabeth thought. She

is Ernest's wife, his widow, the mother of his children, a woman to whom he owed, and for whom he discharged, obligations. Elizabeth had never aspired to be all of his life, nor desired for him to possess all of hers. He has been interested in her own children, who accepted her and Ernest's friendship for that which it was. She blessed them for their tolerance. They respected Ernest, and she felt that they held her in respect, as well.

Elizabeth and Ernest had met when she came to the sandspit to paint. He had come to get away from town, to seek the kind of simple life he valued. He and Elizabeth had met quite by accident, on the beach. A year had gone by before she moved into the house, on a rental basis. Beyond her first payment he had declined to accept rent.

"Because I like you more than any woman I have ever met," he told her. "I would like to give the house to you. Call it my contribution to art if you like."

She had declined to accept. She had said "No" at first to living in the house rent-free. But she had given in finally to make him happy. Even then, it had been a while before they became lovers. They had found happiness in simply being together. There had been on Elizabeth's part, and she believed on his, no feeling of guilt or of shabby behavior.

In the first place, they were both past the age when convention seemed to matter greatly. They had walked the beaches, explored the woods paths, made excursions into the

rain forest. There had been a mutual love of the same things, the same kind of life. They had found surcease in being together.

At his doctor's suggestion, Ernest had turned the business over to his sons and had come to the sandspit to live full time. It had been, he said, the best time of his life.

Laura, who taught in a local high school, knew the family in a more or less personal capacity. She had said once to Elizabeth that the younger son, Carl was something of a "maverick," more interested in art than in engineering. "He's the only one Doris wasn't quite able to mould to her pattern, as I see it. I guess she calls it pride of family, which is not to be denigrated, of course, unless you turn them into egocentrics. She wanted the business to prosper, and it has."

Laura had had occasion to talk to Doris once about Carl's artistic bent. "It didn't take me long to see it wasn't any use. He might keep it as a hobby, she said. But both George and Carl were to go for engineering, to carry on the business and the family tradition."

Moving along the family row, Elizabeth's eyes rested briefly upon each face, so familiar to Ernest. Carl was the only one she had seen before today. She could not help reflecting that George, the eldest, had the kind of face too often characteristic of successful men of business acumen. His wife, whose name was Louise, was even more attractive than

her photos in the papers.

Elizabeth's eyes went back to Carl, who bore a strong resemblance to Ernest. His head was turned a little to one side as though he were truly attending to the Litany. The resemblance was so marked that Elizabeth was distracted for a moment. Carl had the same oddly-quizzical brows, the ruggedness of feature, an individual integrity of appearance, as she thought of it, such as that of a rock or a hill or a tree bole.

The young woman beside him would be his bride of less than a year, Elizabeth surmised. Ernest had shown Elizabeth the wedding pictures. He had been a bit disappointed in his new daughter-in-law, he confessed. "I don't know what gets into a boy. She has a pretty face, a winning manner. She's still very young of course. She's going to have a baby." He smiled faintly. "All of her set are having babies."

The vicar had finished with the Litany and was recounting the fine qualities of the deceased, his respected and influential standing in the community, his business ability, his kindness to others. This was all true, Elizabeth thought. She had never known a more upright man, nor one less self-centered.

None of Ernest's family had appeared to think it strange that he had left his pretentious home in town and come to the sandspit to live. They considered it eccentric of him no doubt but they had not, so far as she knew, protested.

Carl was the only one who came to visit Ernest there with any regularity. Ernest had asked Elizabeth to meet Carl, but she had declined as gently as possible.

"He might not understand. He's young." He would have a natural loyalty to his mother. He ought to have. In the past month Ernest had become strangely insistent. A time or two she had almost wavered.

"You could do so much for him," Ernest begged. "He needs someone to believe in his art. His wife acts as though his painting were some kind of juvenile fetish, not to be allowed to interfere with business or their social life. I'd like to think of the two of you working together here. He's to have my cabin, you know. He's the only one who cares about it."

One morning Elizabeth had been walking with her easel to the beach and Ernest and Carl had driven by on their way to the jetty. Ernest, at the wheel, had slowed and waved. She had returned the wave but had quickly headed for the dunes. Ernest had remonstrated with her afterward. "There's no reason for your running and hiding you know. Carl asked who you were. I told him your name and that you were a close friend who lived nearby. I emphasized the word 'close.' He said, 'You mean you really know Elizabeth Erickson?'"

Elizabeth had tried to make Ernest see how it was. "Carl's one of the family. There's no reason why I should be accepted by the family. We live in a conventional world you know." Looking, now, at Carl's sensitive young face, she

was a little sorry that she had not given in. It would have done no harm, probably.

"A devoted husband and father," the vicar was saying. He was speaking directly to the family. They were among the pillars of this church, the financial supporters of community charities. They would think of a fine memorial for Ernest, one that would help to perpetuate the name, as did the stained window. "His helpmate, his beloved sons and daughter, his devoted grandchildren will revere his memory."

The service had ended. The brevity was the finest feature of the Litany. No promise was made of immortality.

Elizabeth kept her eyes averted from the gleaming mahogany and silver casket, so unsuited to Ernest's simple tastes, as the ushers began, row by row, to administer the evacuation. There was, thank God, to be no viewing of the remains, save perhaps by the family.

Outside, the crowd stood in silent clusters, waiting for the family to emerge. Ernest belonged to the family. Following the long procession to the cemetery, led by the men in uniform, waiting discreetly beside their cycles, he would "belong to the ages." Elizabeth had no wish to watch the departing cortege, to see the family again. But there did not seem to be any way to escape. The crowd was a solid wall around her, with no open exit to the parking lot.

"There they come," the woman who had spoken to her earlier murmured at Elizabeth's elbow. "The tall one is

his sister from Pensacola."

The sister would be Agnes, Elizabeth thought. Ernest had been fond of Agnes, a widowed teacher. He had asked Elizabeth to paint a picture for Agnes, once. Elizabeth had painted the jetty at sunset. She had received a warm letter from Agnes in appreciation. Agnes had written, "I'm glad Ernest has you nearby, Elizabeth." Elizabeth would like to ask Agnes what Ernest had been like as a boy, she thought now, to tell Agnes that she, too, was bereft.

As the family moved toward the waiting limousines and the crowd began to clear, Elizabeth became aware that she herself was being observed. Her eyes traveled swiftly over the family, the widow, the suave elder son, the well-dressed younger women, the bewildered grandchildren, and fell upon Carl.

As their eyes met, Carl's lips lifted slightly in a half-smile of recognition.

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