

HOME

1-46-1

Dr. Prey, church theologian, advisor extraordinaire, clicked his glasses shut in their box and tucked it into his secret compartment. The young lady—very young: seventeen?—lifted her head from her trembling hand and smiled.

“Thank you, doctor.”

“I’m glad you are willing to give up your dreams for your family,” said Dr. Prey, smiling back. “But I think you’re learning the difference between drainage and humility.”

Her smile bubbled like the stages of a light burning low. “Yes,” she said. She stood, pushing back the chair and her rumpled hair—“I hope I am.”

A few more brief words, nods of heads, nervous, confident laughter, and she was in her car. She clasped both hands on wheel, tilted her head, and sighed.

“Thank You, Lord,” she said.

The endless-square-foot church pulled away as she drove on to home.

Home was finite-square-foot block: scraggly hedges blooming Tonka trucks; finger-smudged windows; All God’s Creatures Cemetery; the weedy walk up to the dented front door. Home—screaming children, sticky waffle plates, messed-up beds, toothpaste on socks and socks on floor; and speaking of the hamper, that overflowing into the next room. Home. Home. Home. The cage, the drudge, the noise. Home, the haunting of failures and that larger-than-life cutout she had to fill. No longer. She had her ticket, she had her dream. She had her plan.

Pulling in next to the curb, Susan of Home stuck out her feet onto the pavement. Her heels must have caused shockwaves; they jarred five faces to the window—sad, pouting, beaming, goofy and one missing. She sighed a prayer and walked to the dented door. Before it was halfway open, torrents and floodgates roared:

Jackie touched it.

She did not!

Where was Jackie now?

In her room.

But, Susie—!

“O-kay,” said Susan the Pumped. “I’ll go talk to her later. Is Daddy home?”

No.

“Did anybody call?”

A telemarketer wondering if there was any money to spare.

Susan deleted the monotone message and skipped her eyes over the lunch dishes to the computer. By now, the torrents had dripped down to droplets pinging across the walls—fatal games of football, very fatal quarrels over the merits of a particular book. The wisest hovered around Susan’s typing fingers.

“Whatcha looking up?”

“Linn—please. I’m trying to do something.”

“Did you pick up the milk?”

“No!”

“Good grief, Su!”

The fingers flew across the keys. A formula in Susan’s mind—professional advice equals life all squared—went up in smoke and stung the tender hope that had come to visit, just to see.

But the internet explorer did not go up in smoke—the screen flared with the cool, organized, happy colors of college campus. Her little house in the town—yellow walls, white curtains, serene breezes (she had determined to order those as soon as possible). The college life—study, sweet study, a chance for brains to swirl. Her wardrobe—aprons, spit cloths and holey shirts *out*. Everything she dreamed for danced a jig in her stomach. She knew she was talented; she would not fit in anywhere because of it. She didn’t ask for fame, only familiarity; not success, but Silence.

Not That kind of Silence, the Silence when she had stood beside a coffin with six orphans breathing and crying close to her. And not Another type of Silence, when the next generation was safe in bed, and there were short hours of quiet and seriousness and sanity. In those hours, she had dreamed and purposed to jump the jail and *make* something of herself—a little nest for her own chicks, perhaps, or one just for wisdom.

Every day she got up happy and wished she hadn’t—those days always turned the worst. Shopping lists, diapers, trash, dishes—dishes. Daddy labored and had a paycheck; she slaved and the stares from youth group leaders paid her.

She had fallen on prickles and needles, and then sat the six siblings before the basement television, drove away, and asked Dr. Prey, What do I do with my life?

He sat her down, told her it was unfair for a sister to have to take over as mother, told her this was a calling from God to go and do what He wanted her to do, not what her father wished or her guilt dictated.

The door opened and the bailiff of the Home plodded in, rubbing a hand over a bald head, putting keys on hooks, slinging off the briefcase.

“Hi, Daddy,” said Susan, minimizing the page.

“Hey.”

Jasmine the baby toppled in, shrieking for her daddy. Her daddy put a hand on her head. “Hello, sweetie.”

“Can we talk later, Dad?”

“Yep.”

She looked into his face, intent on mail and ripping the junk. She had forgotten to spot clean that ketchup stain—it glared through red-rimmed eyes on Daddy’s sweater. All the Home ever did: glare, tired and malnourished.

The Talk came after the next generation was in bed.

“Now, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter—I just—Daddy, I really think God’s calling me to go to college and study to be something.”

“All right. Do you have your college picked out?”

“Yes.”

He nodded.

“So—I was thinking I’d look out for, like, a nanny.”

“We’ll find something.”

Another sort of Silence. Susan bit through her nails. Before she had picked out the color of her room, she had her argument settled: cold, firm resolution against fuming red face. She had the words lined up, every bit, from the opening to the closing. She’d have sealed it with her Dr. Prey. Again she bit her nails—an evil picture being trumped by an angelic one like that.

She sat there, biting her nails. That was—all?

Daddy himself was bent, eyes heavy and hands clasped with the look of Abraham over Isaac. His ears were redder than his cheeks. The beating in Susan's heart fed in and from the beating of Daddy's: *guilt, guilt, guilt*.

"I'm going up to bed now," he said. "Good night."

"Good night, Daddy."

And now it was quiet and she could hear her heart pound: *guilt, guilt, guilt*. If she could tear it out—! She stuffed her fingers into the fibers of the couch. She loved her daddy; she loved him.

She pulled the couch blanket around her shoulders and slipped down to the black basement. The stairs padded softly. She stepped off the landing and felt her socks splash. She jumped back and looked up. Miniature waterfalls flooded down the wall, feeding into the marshy carpet.

She threw the blanket up the stairs and peeled off her socks. Inches oozed beneath her bare, cold feet as she walked to the closet and back, balancing towels. She worked silently, holding back a runny nose. Once all her skin was shivering and bumpy, her bitter mind throbbed with the remaining warmth.

There were books before her written in heaven, and there was the book of grudges. If she had blundered up the picture, she had gotten the wrong advice. Or she had gotten the wrong advice and blundered up the picture?

The pages of scrapbooks rustled in her head: Jasmine's first steps (oh, how she had practically burst!), the surprise party for Linn (Linn had practically cried). Every turned page blinded her eyes to the cool, happy colors of Life.

Life. It froze her brain solid.

The water streamed down the wall less, but more like tears. Daddy poked his head in.

"Great." He squished to where Susan wrung out her towels. "But this carpet needed to be ripped out anyway."

"I've got it."

"I'll handle it. The carpet needs to be ripped up. Go sleep the day off."

"Dad, I'll—"

"You need to do whatever you need to do to be happy."

"No!"

Silence. He was quiet, standing with his socks soaking in the water. She was sitting on her knees, arms slung at her sides.

“Daddy,” said Susan, “I can’t let you do everything all by yourself.”

They ripped out the carpet that needed to be ripped out, that was just waiting for a burst Pipe to resolve its destiny. Beneath was a bare, cold core Susan scrubbed and dried. They worked until the clock banged *three*. Then they said goodnight and went to bed.

The morning after, when the next generation got up and saw the naked, ready-to-be-re-carpeted floor, they chattered and shrieked at this new change. Susan sat perched on a barstool, coffee in her hands, looking down into it. She had altered her Favorites section of the computer—no more cool college colors. She had altered her advice and altered her picture. The torrents had dripped down to droplets pinging against the walls.

“Thank you, Lord,” she whispered to the sluggish coffee.

A serene breeze blew from the basement and touched her cheeks. A Silence settled on her heart as Linn asked her for the fifth time *what* had happened.