

Lies of Kindness

Dorothy Bowers flipped back the quilt and sat up on the edge of the bed. This simple act usually told her what kind of day it was going to be. At seventy-five, she had good days and bad days.

A bad day was one where she suffered from morning to night and made it through the waking hours only on the hope the next day would be better. So far it always was, but Dorothy wondered how long it would be before the bad days ran together into a bad week and then a bad month.

Of course, there was nearly always some sort of misery. A shoulder that hurt, a throbbing hip, a pounding head. The normal stuff she expected from living for more than five decades on a farm.

Dorothy shivered and her feet were cold. She grabbed her glasses off the nightstand beside the bed and looked over at the window. Ice had formed at the bottom of each of the eight small panes of glass. They had oil heat in the farmhouse now--thank God there was no more shoveling coal--but the windows were original and without any insulation around them they froze up. Since the ice had not risen much on each pane she guessed the temperature to be around thirty degrees. The height of the ice on the windowpanes was her crude thermometer. Halfway up the pane meant it was in the teens and if the panes were frozen over she knew it was damn cold.

It used to be they would rise while it was still dark outside, so they could take care of the animals. Mainly, it was milking the cows. Every twelve hours they had to drain the beasts and because the tanker truck that carried the milk to the processing plant came

early in the morning they had to have their milk ready for it. So every morning, seven days a week, three hundred sixty five days a year, they got up and milked cows.

Dorothy had never told anyone, but she had cried with relief five years ago when they sold the herd and all the other animals.

She looked over her shoulder. The quilt-covered lump in bed was her husband, Ed. Without being aware of it, Dorothy had held her breath as she listened for his. When she was satisfied, she put on her slippers and shuffled into the bathroom. The toilet seat was cold against her scrawny bottom.

When she came out she dressed and left Ed sleeping as she went downstairs. Dorothy turned up the heat slightly, but things would warm up soon enough. It was Christmas Day and she had baking and cooking to do. In a few hours, sweet fragrances would waft through the house and the windows would steam up with condensation.

While the coffee brewed, Dorothy hummed Christmas carols and prepared breakfast. A slice of toast and a bowl of cereal were all she needed. She'd see to Ed after she finished her own breakfast.

But before she was through eating, she heard the stairs creaking as Ed came down.

"Mornin'," he said when he entered.

Dorothy, chewing a mouthful of cereal, stopped eating and gulped. The food stuck halfway down her throat and she swallowed again. "Good morning, dear."

Even at seventy-seven, Ed was a big man and although he no longer worked the farm as he used to, his muscle had not gone completely over to fat. However, one look at his face and anyone could guess his occupation. Though he was mostly indoors anymore, his face was still dark from all the years of sun and the lines were deep. Sometimes he used

to joke that he would run across some seed that had fallen into one of those creases. His hair had turned gray over the last couple of years, but it was his eyes that caught her attention. They were as blue as ever and today they were filled with life.

She glanced at his clothes and then tension that had filled her upon his entrance faded away as she noticed his shirt was buttoned correctly, his zipper was up and he had socks on both feet.

“Sit. I’ll get you something to eat,” Dorothy said.

“I guess I’d better get out there and start,” he said and headed for the door.

Hurriedly, Dorothy moved to intercept him, but she was tad slow and he reached the door first.

“What’s wrong with the door?” he asked as he twisted the knob back and forth.

“Where are you going?” Dorothy asked and grabbed his wrist.

Ed, a head taller than his wife of fifty-five years, looked down at her hand upon his arm and then into her eyes. She saw confusion and annoyance in his expression.

“I’m gonna get some firewood. I thought we could have a fire in the fireplace when everyone gets here. Little Andy always likes to toast some marshmallows.”

Smiling weakly, she let go of his wrist and said, “That would be nice.”

“There must be something wrong with this door,” he said. “I’ll have to look at the knob.”

“No,” she said too quickly and he gave her another look. “It’s locked, that’s all. Gotta keep out the burglars,” she lied. “I’ll get the key.”

Dorothy went to a kitchen cabinet, reached inside, fumbled around and found the key. She returned and unlocked the door.

“We oughta leave that key in the lock,” Ed said.

“It might fall out.”

“That’s a pain in the ass if I gotta find it every time I want to go outside.”

“It’s cold outside. You should put on a coat,” she said, ignoring his comment.

“You’re like some old hen. I’ll be all right.”

“Don’t be choppin’ any wood. It’s already done.”

“I suppose Santa’s elves done it,” he said as he started out the door.

“That’s their job,” she called after him as he walked across the yard toward the woodpile. He waved her off and she quickly shut the door, turned, put the key inside another cabinet and returned to the door. She watched as he loosened the tarp from one end of the woodpile and pulled out pieces of split wood. Dorothy scanned the area and saw no sign of the ax. Ed pulled the tarp back over the wood and fastened it. When he picked up the wood she stepped back from the door and out of sight. She waited until she heard him approaching before she reappeared at the door and opened it for him.

Ed tromped through the kitchen and into the parlor with his load of wood and she closed the door behind him. She heard him put the wood into the box next to the fireplace, talking to himself as he did.

By the time he returned to the kitchen she had breakfast waiting for him. Ed pulled out a chair, sat at his usual place and began eating. Dorothy busied herself cleaning up and tried not to be too obvious when she looked at him.

“Am I droolin’?” he said.

“What?”

“I must be doin’ something strange the way you keep lookin’ at me.”

“I wanted to get started, is all. I got lots to do today.”

“You got lots to do every Christmas. You don’t have to do this every year,” Ed said when she took his cereal bowl and glass.

Dorothy started to answer him then hesitated as his words sunk in. He realized it was Christmas. She looked at him and smiled. It was going to be a good day.

“I don’t mind. It doesn’t seem like work when everybody comes back. It does my heart good to have a full house once in a while.”

“You ain’t no spring chicken.”

“Ed Bowers! Now don’t you be tellin’ me how old I am. I’m still able to handle cooking dinner for everybody once a year.”

“You don’t have to get ornery. I was just thinkin’ one of the kids might want to have it some year.”

“You know none of the kids has a house big enough to hold everybody. This big old barn has plenty of room,” she said.

“More like they don’t want nobody getting’ them fancy places dirty. Charlie’s house is big enough to hold all of us and then some.”

“What would you know about it, old man? You were there maybe three times in your life. You probably don’t even remember how to get there.”

“I remember good enough.” There was an edge to his voice and she knew she had to be careful when talking about his memory. “That place is one of them McMansions and now with his kids gone him and Bonnie can go for days without seein’ each other,” he said.

“What about us in this place? Sometimes it echoes in here.”

“That’s different.”

Dorothy knew there was no point in following up on that topic. The farm and the farmhouse had been in Ed’s family for three generations and there was no way he was going to leave it voluntarily. She had tried planting that seed after they had given up farming, but had gotten nowhere. Of course, she’d learned since then that stubbornness was part of the process, but even without that there was no chance Ed would give up the farm.

She didn’t mind that much, though at times she felt terribly isolated. Although they now had neighbors on either side of the farm, it wasn’t like they could run next door and borrow a cup of sugar. They had little contact with the people; especially after Ed got wind that they might make a fuss with the township about the farm.

Oh, how he had ranted and raved in those days. He cursed them out, though not to their faces. Thankfully, it didn’t come to that, but he, nor she for that matter, could understand why someone would come to live in the country and then complain about smells and the noise from the farm. It just didn’t make sense.

But as much as she had agreed with him, she instead calmed him and the whole thing blew over without the township getting involved. They heard nothing more since they got rid of the animals.

“Now you get outta my kitchen unless you want to whip up some cookie dough,” Dorothy said and shooed him away. “See if you can make yourself useful somewhere else.”

He grumbled, “I’m going.”

Dorothy smiled after he left, grabbed her apron and tied it around her. The tails nearly went twice around her narrow waist now, but there wasn't time to worry about that. First, she had to bake her cookies and then her pies. She looked at her watch and wondered how it had gotten so late. There was that monster turkey she had to bake, too. If she were going to get everything done she'd have to hurry.

She tried to put everything else out of her mind as she focused on cookies. Normally, she would have had the cookies already baked, but with Ed... well, they hadn't gotten done this year and that's the way it was. Now she had time and she would get them done. Sugar and chocolate chip. No time for anything fancy this year, but that wouldn't matter. They'd all be hungry when they arrived. Always were and it made her feel good to see them eat like they did.

Calculating her ingredients, she figured two dozen of each would be enough. Or would it? She tried to add up all the guests and cursed the speed at which her mind worked anymore. There were Charlie and Bonnie and their two. Then came Fred and Brenda and the three kids and Veronica and Bruce and their boy, Andy.

He was Grampy Ed's favorite, and truth be told, hers too. It wasn't supposed to be that way and she did her best to hide it, but the little darling had captured her heart from the day he was born. Maybe because he was her only daughter's child and so already had a special place reserved in her heart. Or it could be because he was so damn cute. Of course, she was prejudiced, but she had every right to be.

The kid had inherited just the right combination of features from his parents to make him a heartbreaker. He had started school in the fall and Veronica said the girls were

already crazy about him. Dorothy hoped his mother would raise him right, because a boy that handsome could get into as much trouble as any girl, and maybe more.

Naturally, she loved all of her children and grandchildren. There was no question about that and despite all the work she enjoyed having them for Christmas every year. And if she stayed in bed late the next day and her body cried out what did it matter? The point was they all had a good time the day before.

It was sometime between the time she put cookies in the oven and when she was rolling out the pie dough that Ed passed through the kitchen and out the front door.

Dorothy heard him say something about going out, but was focused on the task at hand and didn't listen to his exact words.

"Okay," she said as she wiped the sweat off her forehead with her sleeve.

It wasn't until she had put the fifth and last pie in the oven that she realized he had not come back inside. She pulled off her oven mitts, went to the door and pulled it open. The rush of cold air felt wonderful against her hot skin and it cooled the kitchen. As she stood in the doorway, Dorothy suddenly shivered, but it was not because of the cold. She looked for Ed, but he was nowhere to be seen. She grabbed a coat from the rack next to the door, pulled it on and went outside to look for him.

Out of force of habit from years on the farm, she first went to the equipment shed. She shook her head at her own stupidity. The shed, which had housed everything from trucks to tractors, was empty, as it had been for years. If anything, Ed would have avoided going there because it would have reminded him of the emptiness in his life.

Next, she went to the garage. The car was in there, along with the pickup, but Ed was not. Dorothy walked to the barn, anxiety mounting with each step. Although there was

nothing in the huge wooden structure, which was classic farm red, the doors were still barred. Though she was sure Ed was not inside, she nevertheless fumbled with the board they used to block the doors and pulled it off. It took all the effort her thin body could muster to slide one door partially open. The door fought her and screeched in protest but gave enough that she was able to slide inside.

It was cold in the barn; perhaps colder than it was outside. The wide planks in the walls let in the drafts and the winter sun, so low in the sky, hardly made an effort to warm up the interior. Animal smells still lingered, although it had been a good five years since the building had been home to any. The odor of cow manure mixed with the sweet smell of golden straw that still lay on the floor.

Cautiously, Dorothy moved about until her eyes adjusted to the dim light. There were openings in the floor to the bottom level and the floorboards were getting weak from age and neglect.

“Ed,” she called and waited, but heard no response. She shouted louder a second time and decided he wasn’t in the barn. After she went back out and shut it up, Dorothy stood for a while trying to decide where he would have gone. Her guts twisted like someone wringing out a wet towel as she wracked her brain. Then it occurred to her where he might be. She hurried back the other way and by the time she reached the workshop her heart was pounding with exertion and fear.

She threw open the door and Ed spun around toward her.

“There you are!”

He gave her a puzzled look and said, “Here I am.”

“What are you doing?”

She knew she said it more harshly than she meant to, but it was hard to get herself under control.

“I thought I’d see if I could find some things for the grandkids,” he replied and she could tell that he was studying her.

“I wish you’d tell me when you go off like that,” she said in a lower tone.

“Are you my wife or my warden? Besides, I walked right past you and told you I was comin’ out here.”

“I don’t remember that,” she said and then did recall him passing by her in the kitchen. Had he mentioned it?

“You was too busy with your pies and such to pay attention.”

“My pies!” she cried and turned and ran--or what passed as running--back to house.

“Oh, please no,” she moaned when she reached the door and burst into the kitchen.

Dorothy rushed over to the oven and thanked God. She was just in time. The crust of the pumpkin pie was dark, but not so much anyone would complain. Grabbing her oven mitts, she pulled the pie from the oven and set it to cool on the counter.

She suddenly went weak in the knees and stumbled over to a chair and sat down. For a few seconds the world went gray, so she put her head between her knees and closed her eyes. When the faintness passed, she raised her head and took some deep breaths. Her hands were still shaking.

Sometimes it all became too much. She knew going in it would be hard to pull off this Christmas dinner, but since it might be the last one where they would all gather here she wanted to do it. She wouldn’t stop now.

Dorothy rose from the chair and threw her shoulders back, determined to get herself together. Damn it, she was a farm wife and she wasn't about to allow an attack of melancholy stand in her way.

Just as she was about to start the turkey, she heard something outside. She hurried to the door to see what was wrong. It was Veronica, her husband Bruce and her lover boy Andy. He was running down the fieldstone sidewalk to the house and he was about to burst right through the door when she threw it open and cried, "Andy!"

His grin grew wide and he hurried into her arms and almost sent both of them sprawling across the kitchen floor.

"Gramma, Gramma," he shouted.

"I missed you. It's been a long time since you visited Grandma."

"Yes and I missed you, too. Look, we brought presents," he said and turned toward his parents, who had caught up to him. "They're for you and Grampy."

"Now don't you tell what Santa left for them at our house. It's a secret," said Veronica as she and Bruce followed their son into the kitchen. Each of them carried a box, which they sat down.

"Mom said Santa got mixed up and left presents for you at our house," Andy explained.

"It sounds like Mrs. Claus needs to give Santa one of them things so he can find his way around."

"They're called GPS and they can take you anywhere in the world," he told her and then said, "Where's Grampy?"

"He's out in the workshop."

“He is?” Andy’s voice rose an octave because he loved being in the workshop with Ed.

Bruce looked at Dorothy, who nodded and mouthed, “It’s okay.”

“Why don’t we go out and see what Grampy’s doing?” Bruce said to Andy, who needed no coaxing to find his grandfather.

Dorothy smiled at him and the two of them went back outside.

“Oh, my God. What smells so wonderful?” Veronica asked.

“Cookies and pies. I was just about to start the turkey.”

“I wanted to get here earlier and help you, but Andy didn’t want to leave his toys.”

“It’s all right. I managed.”

“I can see you did,” Veronica said, looking around the kitchen. “But I still feel guilty. I should have made more of an effort. You’ve got to be worn out doing all this and dealing with Dad.”

Dorothy didn’t tell her that only minutes ago she’d been sitting on a chair, trying not to faint.

“Don’t feel guilty. Help me get this bird in the oven.”

When she opened the door to the refrigerator and Veronica saw the turkey, she said, “Jesus, Mom. This thing is huge. Are you sure it’s not an ostrich?”

She laughed and said to her daughter, “Don’t tell anybody. We’ve had it out behind the barn for the last year.”

Dorothy opened the oven door while Veronica put the turkey in the oven and then asked, “How long will this thing have to bake?”

“Until it’s done, I guess.”

“That tells me a lot. You always did keep your baking secrets to yourself.”

“They wouldn’t be secrets if I gave them all away. Besides, it seems to me that I tried to teach you how to cook.”

“Don’t rub it in. I’ll never cook as well as you. Why do you think my two guys were so happy to come here?”

“I know why Andy came. To see his Grampy.”

“Of course. How is he?”

“He’s fine. Today.”

“I don’t know how you do it out here all by yourself. It’s got to be so hard on you.”

“I manage.”

“But look at you. You’re as thin as a rail and you look so tired.”

“Thanks,” Dorothy said.

“You know what I mean. How long are you going to do this?”

Dorothy sighed. It was a discussion they’d had several times and she didn’t want to get into it again, not today. They were saved by a knock on the door. Both of them turned to see who it was and Fred and Brenda came in followed by their brood. Fred was the second son and eight years older than Veronica. He had married Brenda a couple of years after college and before long they started making babies, though their three boys were hardly babies anymore.

She had thought that at least one of the boys might bring a girlfriend and was a little disappointed none of them had. Of course, kids were in no hurry to settle down nowadays. Jimmy was the oldest, John was in the middle and Timothy was the youngest.

She saw them so rarely that they seemed to change dramatically each time. How long had it been? Last Christmas?

Fred and Brenda gave out hugs and kisses after they laid their packages down. The three boys were less enthusiastic about it, but each of them also gave their grandmother a hug.

After all the greetings were exchanged and coats hung up, Fred asked, “Where’s Dad?”

“He’s out in the workshop,” Dorothy replied.

“He is?” He sounded as excited as Andy had.

“Andy and Bruce are out there, too,” Veronica said.

“Do you guys want to go out and see your grandfather or *do you want to stay here with the women?*” Fred asked his sons, though his emphasis on the second part of the sentence hardly left them a choice. The four of them pulled their coats back on and went outside.

The three women were talking when they heard another knock on the door. The rest of the family, Charlie and Bonnie, had arrived.

“Hi, Mom,” said Charlie.

“Hello, dear. Bonnie, you look wonderful. Who is this strange man you brought with you?”

“Hi, Grandma,” Chad said. He smiled and for an instant Dorothy saw the young boy from years ago who looked so much like his father.

“You’re missing someone.”

“Heather went to Mark’s parents’ house,” Charlie explained.

“I’m sorry, Dorothy. We tried to get her to come, but Mark was insistent. He can be so irritating,” Bonnie said of her son-in-law.

Dorothy could tell by Bonnie’s expression there was more than a little irritation going on in the background, but didn’t push it.

“It’s okay. We have to remember they’re not just ours anymore,” she said.

“I know oh so well,” Bonnie said.

Charlie looked around and Dorothy knew what he was going to say. Before he could ask, Dorothy said. “Your father is in the workshop.”

He smiled and said, “You always could read minds.”

“It was a trick I learned dealing with you three,” she replied to her oldest.

“I’ll bet it came in handy with that one,” Charlie said.

Veronica made a face at him and he said, “Careful or it’ll stay like that.”

“Go on out there with the men. If they’ll have you,” Veronica said. “Then we can tell your wife what you’re really like.”

“I know too much already,” Bonnie said.

Charlie said to Chad, “Come on, Chad. I feel the hormones flowing in here.”

After they had left, Brenda said to Bonnie, “All right. Spill it. What’s going on with Mark and Heather?”

“Don’t get me started,” Bonnie said, although they all knew that was exactly what she wanted.

Soon the three younger women were chatting away about their children and their relationships and whatever else came to their minds. Dorothy only half listened and threw in an occasional comment. She checked on the turkey while the others sat at the table and

ate cookies, drank coffee and talked. She knew better than to try to give them any real advice from the experience she had gained from raising three kids. They'd only nod and smile politely and forget what she said as soon as she said it.

It wasn't that they didn't take her seriously--or was it? No, they had their own ideas about how to do things and didn't need an old woman sticking her nose in where it wasn't wanted. If they did want her advice, they'd ask.

It wasn't long before the men started wandering inside, the younger ones first, except for Andy. She knew he would stick with his grandfather as long as he could. Dorothy suspected the older grandchildren had gotten bored or hungry while they were in the workshop. They quickly got into her cookies and it made her happy to see them enjoying them so much.

The grandchildren were still munching on cookies and eyeing the pies when the men returned. She could tell by their chatter they were in a good mood. As had happened so many times over the years, Ed led the procession while the rest followed. Quickly, the kitchen filled up and the crowd spilled over into the living room. Everyone was talking at once and the noise rose to a low roar. The temperature in the kitchen, already up because of the baking she'd been doing all morning, spiked as the heat from the many bodies radiated in waves.

Dorothy fanned herself as she tried to stay cool, but the rising temperature almost made her giddy. Sweat rolled down her right temple. She felt each heartbeat pound in her head and her mouth was so dry she couldn't spit if she had to. At last, she decided to get away until she could get hold of herself. She slipped into the living room and although there was a blaze burning in the fireplace, it was still cooler than it was in the kitchen.

She was so concerned with herself she didn't see Andy at first. He was sitting in a chair off by himself with a serious expression on his face as he stared into the fire. He hadn't looked so unhappy when he'd gone out to the workshop.

"Andy," she said to him and she could tell that he hadn't been aware of her either.

When he didn't answer she went over and sat on the arm of the chair and leaned toward him.

"What's the matter, honey?" Dorothy asked.

"Nothing," he said in a tone that told her far more than his response.

"Are you sure? You look sad. It's Christmas and you should be happy. Everybody's here and having a wonderful time."

"I know."

"Why don't you go out with everyone else?"

"I don't want to."

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Can you tell me what's the matter?"

He turned and looked up at her with brown eyes that were big enough to swim in and said, "Are you tired, Grandma?"

It must be obvious even to him, so she didn't lie. "Grandma got up very early today to get ready for all of you. I'll bet you woke up early too, so you could open all those gifts. I think we need a nap. Maybe after dinner you and I can sneak away and take a snooze. Just the two of us. Would you like that?"

"I don't know."

Whatever had happened out in the workshop had clearly saddened the little boy. Dorothy couldn't remember seeing him in such a mood before, though she didn't see him as often as she would like. Aside from the occasional grumpiness of a small child, he'd always been happy when he visited his Grampy and Gramma.

"Come on," she said as she rose from the chair and extended her hand. "Let's go see what's cookin'. I'll bet Mr. Turkey is almost done."

Andy hesitated and then took her hand and allowed her to lead him into the kitchen.

"Do you want to see the turkey?" she asked. She had to speak up in order to be heard over the noise in kitchen.

He nodded and they went over, opened the oven door and looked in.

"There he is. It won't be long now," Dorothy said. "Do you want a drumstick?"

"Yes," he said barely loud enough for her to hear him.

"Let's set the table."

When the others saw what Dorothy and Andy were doing they began to pitch in and soon the dining room table was covered with a red and green tablecloth. Plates, silverware and drinking glasses were distributed then the food appeared. With all the help she now had, it all seemed so easy to Dorothy, but she knew the truth. Behind the scenes things were never that simple.

The table, with the extensions fitted in, was large enough to seat them all, although it seemed those seated on the ends needed binoculars to see one another. Ed, as head of the household, got the seat of honor at the head of the table. Dorothy could have had the other end, but she insisted Charlie take it. She wanted to sit next to Andy, whose

downbeat mood no one else noticed. They weren't a religious bunch and not wanting to be hypocritical at Christmas they didn't say grace.

They were, however, a hungry group and food was quickly piled high on plates. Andy received one of the prized drumsticks and the appendage from the big bird took up most of his plate. For a few minutes it was quiet in the room as people ate rather than talked. The silence didn't last long, though. After a few bites, conversation resumed and the volume of a Bowers' family dinner returned to normal.

It all reminded Dorothy of a time long past when she, Ed and the boys sat in this same room, eating and talking after putting in a day of farm work. Of course, back then the crowd around the table had been much smaller, but she'd bet it had been just as loud. It was seldom quiet on a farm. If it wasn't animals or kids making noise, then it was some kind of machinery.

How long ago had it been, she asked herself and then wondered if she really wanted to figure it out. She wasn't a nostalgic person--there wasn't time for daydreaming on a farm--but this year she couldn't help thinking back. It must have been... fifty years ago. She swallowed hard. Jesus. It couldn't be, but it was. Half a century. It seemed even longer when she thought of it that way.

At first the thought saddened her and then Dorothy looked around the room at all the people gathered around her table. They were all smiling and that was enough to lift her spirits.

However, she looked to her left and saw little Andy had hardly touched his food. He may have taken a couple of bites out of the drumstick and was pushing his other food

around on his plate rather than eating it. She was going to ask him again what was bothering him when he said, “Grampy.”

The din of the others’ conversation drowned out his little boy’s voice. He tried again and when Ed still didn’t notice him he yelled, “Grampy!”

The shout finally got Ed’s attention. “Yes, Andy.”

“Grampy, do you have Oldtimers Disease?”

Silence descended over the group as suddenly as someone flipping a switch.

“What?” Ed said.

“Timmy said you have Oldtimers Disease.”

Everyone at the table turned and looked at Timmy, whose face went as red as the tablecloth and his eyes opened wide.

Here it is, thought Dorothy. The bull is out of the pasture; the eight-hundred-pound gorilla is free from his cage; the dark cloud that everyone had been ignoring has unleashed its storm. The subject was now officially out there.

“Timmy,” Brenda said.

“I, I...” he stammered.

“It’s all right,” Dorothy said.

“We all get Oldtimers Disease,” Ed said. “That’s what happens when you get old.”

“Are you going to die, Grampy?” Andy asked and they could see the boy was barely under control. His lower lip was trembling and his eyes were wet.

Brenda was glaring at Timmy, who said, “I didn’t tell him that. I didn’t.” Timmy was in the same condition as Andy and rather than let anyone see him cry he pushed his chair

out and ran from the room. Brenda started to go to until Fred told her to stay and he went after Timmy.

While that little drama on the side was going on Dorothy wondered how Ed was going to respond to Andy.

“Not until you see what I got you for Christmas,” Ed said.

The forced cheerfulness in his voice could not even fool a six-year-old because tears were now running down both of Andy’s cheeks.

“I don’t want you to die,” Andy said and lost all semblance of control. The tears flowed freely and he sobbed.

“Honey, Grampy isn’t going to die,” Veronica said from across the table.

“Let me, dear,” Dorothy said and she rose and slid Andy’s chair out from the table. She picked him up and he laid his head upon her shoulder and she could feel his wet cheek against her collarbone.

“Mom, please don’t try to carry him,” Veronica said.

Dorothy said, perhaps a touch too sternly, “I threw hay bales around since before you were born. I can carry one little boy. Now you go ahead and finish eating.”

Her bravado got them both up the stairs and barely into her bedroom before her trembling arms gave way and she practically dropped Andy onto the bed. She knew her back would be paying hell the next day.

“Come on, slide over Mr. Andy and let me lie next to you,” she said.

He did as he was told and she got into the bed next to him. She wiped the tears from his cheeks with the back of her hand. His cheeks were warm to the touch and his face was flushed.

The two of them laid in silence and Dorothy thought he was drifting off into sleep until he asked, “What’s Oldtimers Disease?”

God, what could she tell him that he would understand? She wanted to tell him that it was a cruel son of a bitchin’ thing that would sneakily steal a person’s brains before he even knew it. But it was worse than a thief. It was a murderin’ bastard that liked to kill someone real slow as though it got some kind of pleasure by first robbing him of everything he had.

First, it would take away a person’s memory and you’d have to remind him of everything, even Christmas coming up, over and over until you were ready to scream. Common sense was the next to go, leaving him so goddamned addle-brained that you had to watch him every minute. A trip to the woodpile was frightening enough but good Christ you had to hope he didn’t find the ax.

For an instant she considered telling him it was Alzheimer’s Disease and not Oldtimers Disease, but what good could come from it? If he knew the true name he might find out the correct information about it rather than the lies of kindness she was about to tell him. If he found out the truth it would devastate him. She was all for being honest with kids, but there were some good lies, like the kind you told a little boy about his grandfather.

“It’s somethin’ that happens to old people. That’s why they call it Oldtimers Disease,” she said.

He pondered and then asked, “Will you get it, too?”

It was a hell of a good question and one she had tried to avoid. What would become of them if she did? Would they end up drooling together in some nursing home?

“I hope not.”

“Why did Grampy get it?”

Maybe the kid would be a lawyer, because he knew exactly which questions to ask. She had asked herself the same thing many times. Why did the wheel of fortune stop on Ed Bowers’s number? He was a good man. He’d treated her well and helped raise three wonderful kids. Then, bang, the Russian roulette revolver of life went off in his head and blew holes into his brain.

“I don’t know.”

“What happened to Grampy when he got it? Did he get sick and throw up?”

Dorothy wished it was that simple. No, this disease hit with a low blow, but not one between the legs. Instead it went for the most valuable of the family jewels: the mind. It gradually but inexorably threaded its hateful tendrils through the brain like some alien invader from a movie and sucked away the ability to think and changed the personality. All the while it let the body go on, often wandering aimlessly by itself.

That’s why the doors were locked and the keys hidden. The body, the ship without a captain, might just decide to wander off to wherever the winds blowing through the empty brain dictated.

“Well, sometimes he acts a little funny,” she said.

“Does he tell jokes?”

“It’s not that kind funny.”

Indeed, it wasn’t that kind of funny. It wasn’t a laughing matter at all when you wake up and find your husband missing in the middle of the night.

“Oh,” he said and she knew he didn’t grasp what she was trying to say.

“He’s different, not like Grampy.”

He was different, all right. Sometimes it seemed as though he had multiple personalities living inside him. One minute he could be as pleasant as apple pie, the next a hot-tempered tyrant and still the next as stubborn as a donkey.

“Will he die?” he whispered.

“Andy, do you know that everyone dies some day?”

“I guess.”

“They do. Your mom may not like me tellin’ you that, but it’s true. Some people live a long time and some people don’t, but everyone dies.”

“Will I die?”

Dorothy hesitated but figured when she told him the first part she was in for a dime, so she might as well be in for a dollar. If Veronica was angry with her, she’d have to live with it. There was plenty of anger to go around.

“Not for a very long time and I don’t want you to worry about that.”

She didn’t tell him there would be plenty of time later in life to obsess about it.

“I don’t want you to worry about Grampy anymore either,” she added. “Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes,” he said and she knew he was telling his own lie of kindness.

“Let’s go down and see what Grampy has for you.”

The two of them did go downstairs and found everyone in the living room. It was time to open gifts. Because of the size of the family, they worked out a gift exchange system; otherwise they would have gone broke buying for everyone. However, Dorothy and Ed reserved the right to spoil the grandchildren and had something for each of them.

The happy chatter stopped momentarily when the others saw Andy and Dorothy descending the stairs, but quickly resumed. Andy walked over to his parents as Dorothy went to the empty chair she knew they saved for her. Veronica said something to Andy, who nodded his head, and she tousled his hair.

“Let’s start with Andy,” said Ed, the overseer of gift giving. Years earlier, when the grandchildren were younger, there had been much more excitement. Dorothy missed those days, another victim of the aging process. “There’s something under the tree for you.”

Andy walked over to the tree until he found the package with his name on it. Dorothy wondered when Ed had managed to wrap it and get it under tree. Andy carefully tore the paper open and inside he found a carved wooden dinosaur. The boy picked it up and studied it carefully then smiled.

“Somebody told me you liked dinosaurs,” Ed said.

“It’s beautiful, Dad,” Veronica said and Dorothy knew they were thinking the same thing. How did he do it? How had he made the wonderful piece when she was afraid to let him near sharp objects?

Andy went over to where Ed was sitting and said, “Thank you, Grampy.” He hugged his grandfather and Dorothy had to dab away her own tears.

“Not bad for an oldtimer, is it?” Ed said.

The little boy nodded and Ed said, “The best thing is it don’t need no batteries. You know how to make it work?”

Andy shook his head and Ed pointed to his head and said, “You use this, right up here, and he’ll be any dinosaur you want him to be and he’ll do anything you want him to do. Come up here on Grampy’s lap and let’s give him a name.”

The man in charge of gift giving forgot his duties, so Dorothy took over. Soon the room was buried in brightly colored papers and bows as gift after gift was opened to ohs and ahs. Dorothy could feel the room fill with Christmas cheer.

However, reality reared its head after a couple of more hours and gradually their visitors drifted away, just as they had done over the years. Thankfully, the entire cleanup was finished and when everyone had gone Dorothy found herself fighting to keep her eyes open.

“Let’s go to bed, old man,” she said.

“Are you trying to get me in the sack?” Ed asked, eyes twinkling.

“It’s not an invitation.”

“It sure sounds like one,” he said and took her in his arms. “I don’t get many of those anymore.”

“Good thing. It’d probably kill you.”

“I ain’t dead yet and I’m gonna show you.”

In his eyes she saw the man she’d married all those years before and not the one who was being eaten away from the inside. Dorothy felt something stir in her, something else she thought the disease had stolen from both of them: physical desire for her husband.

When they were through making love and he held her she was already starting to worry about what the next day would bring. Where would he be? Would he be in lost in

the past? Or worse, would it be somewhere that she couldn't imagine and she couldn't reach him?

Who would he be? Would he be the man she married or someone totally different?

But she forced her worries out of her mind for now. She had hoped for a good day and she gotten it. What more could she ask out of Christmas?