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# A PLACE FOR WAITING

BY JOHN T. HITCHMER

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Before his wife died, Eben Sheldon had been a man of routine. In the summer following her death Eben changed his daily routine very little. He began his day before first light. Dressed in khaki trousers and long-sleeve khaki shirt, he ate breakfast and, while he sipped coffee, read the morning paper that had been tossed onto his front porch. Preferring quiet as he read, he kept the kitchen radio turned off. As Eben read he sometimes mouthed, whispered words as if to reinforce their meaning. Afterward, he washed and rinsed the breakfast dishes, placed them in the strainer on the counter, and pushed in his chair at the table. He then was ready for his outdoor rituals.

Walking through the mud-room off the kitchen, Eben removed a single key from a nail eye-level beside the back screen door. He let the screen door thack shut behind him, walked to his garage and opened the double doors, the sun warm on his neck and the aromas of metal, oil, and wood as pleasant as Virginia's soft voice. From a row of garden tools arranged on hooks along one wall, he took down the three-pronged claw and the grass shears and walked to the garden in the side yard, where he loosened soil, pulled weeds and trimmed grass grown too close to marigolds, miniature roses, and tall zinnias and irises. He carried the clippings to his vegetable plot in the backyard and firmed them beneath tomato, pepper, and cucumber plants. The sun on his shoulders, Eben studied the blossoms of each plant, smiled at early fruits smaller than marbles. He watched bees hover around the tomatoes' yellow blossoms, the white of green peppers, and the yellow-orange blossoms of cucumbers, and he tried to gauge when blossoms might transform into fruits...Late July, early August. Before leaving them, Eben bent closely to the plants and touched their leaves, soft as Virginia's hair, and he breathed in their aromas.

By mid morning he heard noise from nearby yards: mothers warning children; children yelling, screeching, as they rolled and skidded on their carts and bikes; dogs yipping, barking--all irritable sounds thankfully cushioned by the wall of lilacs, forsythias, and hemlocks he and Virginia had planted the year after they bought the house, the bushes and trees pruned but now tall and wide enough as decisive borders.

"They're just kids playing," Virginia had gentled him, her hand on his shoulder, whenever he had complained about the noise.

He understood children needed a place to play, but he liked--he *wanted* calm and quiet around him now that Virginia was gone. Two months now.

When the sun glared on his back, Eben brushed dirt from his hands, returned the garden tools

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to the garage, locked the doors, and sought the house again.

In the kitchen he poured himself a glass of ice water and then closed the back door and drew the curtains on the east side of the house. On the dining room wall next to the set of triple windows was Virginia's framed watercolor "Summer Irises," the one she had done two?--No, three years ago after their week in Cape May. He stood in front of the painting, again, and remembered...

A Saturday afternoon: They had sat on a bench across the street from a church. A wedding party paraded down the church steps. Smiles and laughter, the groom holding the bride's hand as they ran down the walk, stepped into a horse-drawn carriage, and rode away waving to the guests' congratulatory cheers.

"Isn't that nice," Virginia had said, her hand gentle on his arm, and he had agreed.

Walking back to the old Victorian style bed and breakfast where they had stayed, she pointed out purple irises at the base of a white, cross-thatched archway entrance to a yard. The next day she came back to the yard and took photographs: a close-up of the latticed entrance and a long view of the yard through the white arch. Home, she sketched the scene in pencil once, twice, and then after mixing and finding the colors she wanted, she painted the scene, the long green leaves and stalks and violet petals in a kind of attendance to the white archway, the green yard waiting.

Virginia had captured the life of those images, as she had captured the stark landscaped life of "Winter Valley," the watercolor that hung in the living room: white birches and wooden fence posts in the midst of snow, ponds of snow, it seemed, with blighted grass stalks jutting through the crust; trees, posts, snow--all looming toward a distant mountain ridge. A still life, yet a life in quiet motion.

He cleared the constriction in his throat and looked away.

As summer continued, Eben began to change his routine in the early afternoon. Without the need to care for Virginia, and rather than stay in the house, he took walks. He was a tall man, an inch over six feet, and in spite of his seventy-two years of age his strides were confident. He varied his route day to day but invariably rested in Memorial Park in the center the southern New Jersey town where he and Virginia had met, married, and stayed together forty-eight years. The park's oak and maple-shaded walkways and wooden benches provided a pleasant setting to watch the town's summer activity: traffic on Broadway, brown-skinned and white-skinned young people in their turned-around caps and baggy pants as they hustled and swaggered to whatever they listened to...Did they know what they wanted for their future? Perhaps they didn't want to think about the future. Perhaps they wanted to stay right there on the sidewalk and listen and swagger to their voices and music for the rest of their life.

But they must want *something*, don't they?

Perhaps, he considered, he didn't understand children at all. Perhaps he didn't have time or desire to understand them anymore.

Thank goodness Dorothy and Jim, his own children, had never lacked direction. Thank goodness they had not drifted from the importance of good grades, direction, and family he and Virginia had impressed upon them. Even though Jim's medical career had taken him to California, and Dorothy preferred the dry climate of Arizona to the close and humid summers of southern New Jersey, they still called him once, maybe twice a month. He cherished those calls in the same way he cherished the flowers and vegetable plants in his gardens. They were

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something to await, to care for today and remember to care for tomorrow. Tomorrows were still important.

It surprised Eben one September afternoon that the empty bench on which he usually rested was occupied by a man who looked the same age as he. Eben approached the bench, slowed his pace, nodded to the man, and continued on.

"Eben Sheldon?"

The man wore rimless glasses and was dressed in brown trousers, long-sleeve white shirt with the cuffs folded back, and brown and white wing-tip shoes. He rose from the bench and extended his hand.

Eben did not at first recognize the stranger and was at first hesitant about but accepted his hand.

"Henry Vandergriff," said the man.

Yes, Eben thought, as the man's face, voice, and name came into focus. Here was the usher who had welcomed Virginia and him at First Methodist Church the handful of times they had attended Morning Worship... Yes, the gentleman who had invited them after the service to the social hour. They had accepted the invitation only once. "Too stuffy for me," Eben had confided to Virginia afterwards. "Handshakes like soft bread."

"They meant well, Eben. Give them another chance sometime."

He didn't.

Now Henry Vandergriff said, "I've seen you come by here afternoons lately. Sit for a minute?"

*He recalls his first meeting with Henry Vandergriff as timely. At home, the still window curtains and empty chairs and the closed front door had created a nearly overpowering melancholy in him, an emotion he had not fully realized until he met and began to talk with this relative stranger: a man who, like himself, was retired, lived in a house with too many rooms, some of which he did not enter for days at a time. "No reason to," Vandergriff had said during their second meeting.*

*Eben Sheldon understood the imposing presence of empty rooms.*

He looked forward to his afternoon meetings with Henry Vandergriff the same way he had welcomed the sound of Virginia's footsteps on the stairs when she came down to breakfast: the comfort of familiar sounds; with Henry, the comfort of unhurried conversation and silence. When it rained the two men shared a table at a bakery across the street from the park. They sipped coffee, talked of their past lives--marriage, jobs, travels, children. Henry and Helen Vandergriff's two sons had graduated from Lorrence High School a few years ahead of Dorothy and Jim and lived out of state, too. "You raise your kids to leave home and survive on their own," Henry Vandergriff said tapping his fingers on the table. Eben agreed, and cleared tightness in his throat.

They discussed the state of the world and its problems they could do nothing about, except "get

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our two cents in," as Henry put it one afternoon over coffee.

"The more you live, the more you realize there's very little you can control, so you just take care of what you have," Eben said, surprised he had articulated a point of view he had seldom expressed to anyone, only to Virginia, their conversations filled so often with daily plans and tasks.

He sipped his coffee.

Henry Vandergriff pursed his lips, scrunched one eye, and said, "The more I hear about this war over there, these suicide attacks, the more I think you're right. Where's the sense of caring for the order of things?"

Eben shook his head and restrained a smile. "Maybe only at this table," he said.

"But I *don't* understand it," Henry said. "All these years, what have we learned? First sticks and stones, then muskets and rifles, now bombs and missiles. I don't understand it."

On a mild Indian summer afternoon, Eben accepted Henry's invitation to dinner. Henry and his wife Helen met him at their front door, where Helen thanked him for the gift of yellow chrysanthemums and made a place for them on the dining room table. Helen was a tall woman who wore her iron gray hair pulled back in a single long braid. She told Eben that she had seen some of Virginia's watercolors at the annual Spring Art Walk. "I could almost feel the texture of her lilies and irises," she said.

Eben stopped by the next day and gave the Vandergriffs a framed watercolor he had stored in the attic the week after Virginia had died. The painting was of a white Cape with black shutters and with lilies and irises growing beneath a set of French windows. In the lower right corner Virginia had written "Summer Hope." It was her last painting.

Before he left that afternoon, Helen said, "Come have Thanksgiving with us, Eben."

He accepted.

*He recalls the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas as some of the most comfortable of his life. With his good friend he observed the people of the town prepare for holidays. As a man now watching, he thought of himself as someone who had done everything in life he had wanted to do; now, walking through Memorial Park or sitting in the bakery, he could watch others go about their lives and still feel satisfaction toward his past and present life. When you are old, he would confide to Henry Vandergriff, you better understand how things and events and people connect to each other, even if there doesn't seem to be much reason or order in the world. "There is here," Henry said, waving toward the park and the people on the street and, finally, to Eben. "There is."*

A fine snow fell Christmas Eve day. Slow at first, it fringed rooftops and lawns and sidewalks, but by an ashen twilight the snow blew heavy and thick: a dense cloud, Eben thought, watching the storm from the Vandergriff living room window.

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"They say it won't stop till tomorrow morning," Eben said.

Helen Vandergriff sat with an open book on her lap, a lace bookmark along the pages' inner seam. "We'll have to get our neighbor boy to shovel our walk tomorrow," she said to her husband who poured sherry at the dining room table.

"Nonsense," remarked Henry. "Nobody, 'specially a boy, wants to work Christmas morning."

Without turning from the window, Eben said, "I'll do it. I don't mind shoveling snow. You don't have a long sidewalk. Besides, I like being out in snow."

Later Eben refused Henry's offer of a ride home and instead walked. He smiled in awe and appreciation of the swirl of wind and snow against him as he recalled past winter nights when he and Virginia lay in bed, their hands touching, and listened to wind whip snow against the house like sand against glass.

That night he fell asleep listening to the wind and snow, and awoke Christmas morning when it was still dark. He made himself hot cocoa and then, bundled in layers and boots and hooded jacket he swept his front steps and shoveled a narrow path down the front sidewalk. The snow was well over half a foot deep, the bottom a crust of slush and ice.

Carrying the shovel, he trudged the six blocks to the Vandergriff house. The windows were dark; they reminded him of rectangular open mouths. He saw no lights inside. His back to the house, Eben cut into the snow at the base of the front porch. His rhythm was slow, deliberate, the only sound on the street in gray morning, the coated trees and roofs like figures in one of Virginia's paintings. He rested every few minutes, leaned on the shovel, watched his breath come from his mouth like a white ghost and heard his heartbeats kick like a dancer.

Helen opened the front door and called to him. "Eben, come in and have some coffee. Our neighbor boy's coming over in a little while. He'll do the rest. Come on in," she said, almost pleading.

He waved and replied, "In a minute."

He turned away and cut the next block of snow. At the corners of his eyes burst bright waves of light. Thinking it was sunlight glaring off the snow, he looked at the sky but it was still low and gray. His breath came shorter. He thought it strange because he had not scooped the snow, and now he felt perspiration trickle down his face and inside his undershirt. His heart felt as if it was clamped in a vice.

Then, he collapsed.

*He often speaks of his recuperation in the hospital and at the Vandergriff home as a lifeless period, an experience like none other in his life. His area of existence was a confining place, brightened only by flowers and voices outside the rooms. Yet, he saw these comforts as entities of a greater loss, but even as he regained strength to climb stairs, walk around the block, and eventually take care of himself at home, he looked upon such activities as less than ordinary, wastes of time, and he yielded to waiting.*

*Without his knowing, the Vandergriffs notified his son and daughter of his illness. Jim could not take leave from his practice until the spring. He requested weekly updates from the Vandergriffs.*

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*Eben called him the night Helen and Henry brought him back to his house.*

*"How are you, Dad? It's good to hear from you," his son said.*

*"As good as can be expected with this sort of thing, I guess. I'm home, and it looks like I'm going to be here for awhile."*

*"Well, that's good. Listen, I'm sorry that..."*

*Eben paid little attention to his son's apology. The tone of Jim's voice was like the color and texture of woodwork around Eben's front door: smooth, defined, clear-grained. You could pass it by without seeing it and yet remember how it was and how it felt when you first ran your hand across it.*

*"...as soon as I can get away," Jim said.*

*"I expect to be here," Eben said.*

*Of Dorothy's appearance in his front doorway, Eben says he did not at first recognize her. The sun bright through the windows and the door made her a silhouette. When she said "Hi, Dad," he immediately recognized her voice, and as she stepped closer he saw that her blond hair looked hard and tinted the way some nurses colored their hair, and she held her mouth in a grudging smile.*

*She put down her suitcase and took his hand.*

At the breakfast table the next morning Dorothy poured tea for him and for herself. She set his cup and saucer in front of him. "There you are," she said, but something in her tone annoyed him, reminded him of the condescending nurses who had assumed he was deaf when they greeted him: "How are we today, Mr. Sheldon?" they had shouted, and he had shouted back, "Good enough to hear you!"

Dorothy sat across the table from him now. "Dad, you trust me, don't you? I mean, if I were to do something that involved you, you'd know I would be doing it for the best, wouldn't you?" She sat back and curled her arm around the top left spindle of the chair.

"I think I know what's coming next," Eben said, "and the answer is 'No.' 'No!'"

"That's what I thought you'd say. But—"

"Don't treat me like one of your clients, Dorothy. I'm not moving to some place I don't know anything about and don't want to know anything about."

"Dad, listen: I can easily find a living arrangement for you close to where I live. It would be your own place, you could take care of it the way you want, nobody looking over your shoulder and telling you what to do. Not even me," she smiled. "Nice neighbors. And, a healthy climate..."

"Dorothy?" he said, and held up his left hand to stop her. "No."

He wrapped his hands around the mug of tea and bent over and slowly brought the mug to his mouth. He felt the warmth of the tea on his lips before he sipped it.

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She looked at the cabinets and the floor and smiled.

Days passed. He read the newspapers she brought home from the supermarket. They watched TV together after dinner, talked about the fighting in Iraq. "Wheels within wheels, fire within fire," he said. "Nothing seems to change. I don't understand it."

"Neither do I, Dad," Dorothy said.

She restocked his refrigerator and kitchen cabinets. He heard doors open and close, and after she went upstairs one morning he heard the vacuum whir over the floors and carpets in the rooms he had not opened in weeks, maybe months. He opened the door to the mud-room, took his jacket from a peg, slipped it on, and walked through the house to the front door.

Dorothy came down the stairs. "Dad?"

"I'm just going to stand on the front porch, for God's sake." Feeling her eyes on his back, he controlled an urge to slam the door.

The day was bright. Sunlight glinted off the snow, and the snowmelt dripped from the edge of the roof. The scents of water and snow and something else--Grass, dirt? No, too early--drifted in the air. The sidewalk path that Dorothy had cleared was not as wide as the space he would have made. One block away the mailman bent toward the front steps of a house.

A still life, he thought, but one with quiet motion.

Eben telephoned Henry Vandergriff when he went back inside. "Come over, will you?"

*He says that Dorothy understood his reasons for wanting to stay. The day she left to go back to Phoenix she said, "I'll worry about you," and then put her hand on his arm and kissed him.*

*"That's your prerogative," he said. Then: "Tell your brother I'm all right."*

*"I'll tell him more than that." She hugged her father and, keeping her arms around him, said, "I'll call you when I get home."*

*He says the house seemed suddenly quiet and neat, too neat after Dorothy left. He found newspapers stacked in an orange recycle bin in the shed off the kitchen, and the lamps and end tables appeared angled differently, closer to the chairs than he wanted them to be. He smiled, and adjusted their position.*

*In the living room he looked again at Virginia's painting "Winter Valley," at the snow that, even in stillness, seemed to move toward the mountain, and he thought how right and natural is that journey.*

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