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SECURITY SYSTEMS

Our parents were being robbed. They were missing big things like fifty-dollar bills, the 18K gold pendant that used to belong to our grandmother, Dad's favorite camera, credit cards. They were missing little things, gloves, flashlights, loose change. They were suffering embarrassment when they tried to pay for purchases in check-out lines. They were picking frantic arguments at home.

They suspected the teen-aged son of the mailman, whom they paid to do yard work, a beautiful boy, they said—just like my brother Chris when he was a child—but one of those, like my brother Bill, who knew how to charm and take advantage. There were also rumors of break-ins in town.

Their world had become uncertain, unsafe. What a coincidence—a miracle almost—when the telemarketer called to tout his expensive security system. It was an answer, and

they'd always believed difficult predicaments yielded to answers. Cheaters never won, hard work paid off, love conquered but never hurt. And if you put your mind to it, for every problem, you could find a fix.

I could tell their hopes had leaped beyond misplaced carkeys. This complicated system of alarms might finally restore order and serenity to their lives.

"I got tired of her worrying about East St. Louis moving in on us," Dad told me over the phone. Now if someone tried to enter the locked house, a siren would shriek. Somehow it could also sense alien body heat or footsteps around the perimeter when our parents were at home, and send out another alert. Then there was the button in their coat closet, which one of them could push in case of emergency. "If your father falls," Mother chimed in, "how would I stand him up again?"

Whatever the calamity, the system was going to signal a central switchboard in New Jersey. Then the monitor in New Jersey would notify the three-man police department back in our parents' town in southern Illinois, as well as the family member our parents had designated.

Fine. Where was the harm? It was their money. If it kept them busy, gave them comfort, what more could you ask? Besides, I wasn't the family member they decided to designate. Although my sister Cathy lived in northern Virginia, she was a lawyer, and since security systems reinforced the law, they'd reasoned that she should be the chosen one.

Soon she was being contacted a couple times a week, sometimes in the middle of the night, by a telephone voice

with a Jersey accent announcing unspecified trouble a thousand miles away.

When she dialed our parents' number, she found them in a state of high excitement over the surprise visit just paid them by the Chief of Police. Still too distracted by the honor of it, they couldn't really pay attention when she tried one more time to talk them through the procedures for unlocking their front door or to warn them about that button in their closet—*for emergencies only: otherwise, do not touch.* "Remember the boy who cried wolf," she'd say. Our father had invoked that fable enough times when we were kids. "After a while, nobody's going to pay any attention."

To me my sister said, "We'd better start thinking about what to do with them." Meanwhile she took on ATT to see if we could get the system removed and at least some of their thousands of dollars back.

I couldn't imagine what she meant—*do with them*—other than what I'd always done, which was pick up the telephone once a week and listen to the latest griefs and grievances: brother Bill's dive from bipolar disorder into addiction, all our divorces, our father's frustrations with local politics, his eroding health.

"What did we do wrong?" they always got around to asking, and in terms too elaborate and theoretical to hurt feelings, I would try to explain. Smug in my enlightenment after years of psychotherapy, I thought I knew.

"You act like they used to be normal," I told my sister. "They'll get by. They always do."

They weren't that old by today's standards, not even seventy. The world was full of AARP poster couples, playing golf and tennis, strolling hand in hand through grocery stores, waiting for tables in restaurants, dozing at the symphony—some of them must have also had have security systems they couldn't quite master.

"What about the car?" Cathy asked. Our father had just had a minor accident. He'd grazed a bridge support in the LTD. "What if next time it's a station wagon full of kids? How are you going to feel then?"

She had me there. Dad pulled into traffic with something to prove: Brigadier General, USAF, retired; former mayor of Lebanon, Illinois. Bill Best was a man of importance, authority. The world would have to rearrange itself if he wanted to change lanes. "I just put on my turn-signal," he'd often told me, "and go."

He stands on a parade ground, reviewing block after block of blue uniforms filing past. The band is playing "Wild Blue Yonder," flags are flapping, salutes jerk in robotic unison. He is at his official peak.

As the new commander of Air Weather Service, he is making his snippet of history. From the grandstand draped in red, white, and blue, my sister and I try to keep our squirming children in their seats, convinced that once out of sight the marchers are double-timing back to the starting line for another round.

The brim of his hat shadows the upper half of his face. The lower half isn't smiling. His chin juts forward as befits this occasion of high seriousness. It is a time to show uncompromising strength. A time if there ever was one when the code we have lived by applies: *feelings under wraps and mouths shut outside the family*.

It wasn't that we had terrible secrets to hide, just that the world was not a friendly place. Outside the family fortress, you needed to be perfect, invincible, to put your *best* foot forward. Forget love; it was respect you were after, edged with intimidation. You wouldn't dream of mentioning depression, collapsing marriages, a fondness for vodka or pot. Actually we never mentioned these things inside the fortress either, not until they stared us right in the face.

At work our father chewed his nails down to barely visible dents on the ends of his fingers. At home, he slathered baby cream on them and encased them in an old pair of leather gloves. To get to sleep, he wrapped his head in a special blanket, which our mother replaced every few years because he had to fiddle with its satin binding all night, eventually wearing it away.

He was tall but not muscular, with long, straight legs. He liked to tell us that our mother had the brains in the family; she'd retort that he had the legs. According to her, he was *fine-boned*, a fact she'd mention in order to emphasize her own *large* bones, something you actually wanted to have when you were checking one of those charts that dictated your ideal body weight.

Being musical, our father could dance, but he was no athlete. For years I blushed for him whenever he dove into a swimming pool: his stroke was stiff, tentative, and he didn't cup his hands.

As The Boss in the family, he had us children all figured out. I was the Sarah Bernhardt. Cathy sulked, then turned into Miss Sunshine the minute she was out of the house. Bill was temperamental and lacked common sense, but Chris you could strand in the wilderness and he would survive eating berries and newts.

He coached us with our schoolwork, and assigned us hobbies according to our talents and inclinations as he perceived them. If I liked to ice skate, my sister would be encouraged to ski. If she collected coins, I was to take an interest in stamps. He chose our colleges, and wrote the essays that accompanied our applications, inscribing them with his own grandiose dreams. Mine outlined plans to pursue medical research—which was why I had to take Latin in high school, so as to have an easy time later with the scientific names of body parts and germs.

"If only I'd had some guidance when I was a kid," he used to say.

We never heard the end of that.

❧

I told him over the phone not to pick me up at the airport. I didn't want to put him to any trouble, I said, meaning I didn't want someone scraping me off a bridge support.

I rented a two-door Geo for the weekend, and pulling out onto the highway, I whacked one of those white and orange roadwork barrels, shattering the mirror on the driver's side.

The chrysanthemums had exploded gloriously along the flagstone path to their front door, upstaging the untended rest of the garden—withered coneflowers, coreopsis, daisies, and phlox—clogged with weeds. Before my raised fist could make contact with their door, it swung open, and there they were, buttoned into their L. L. Bean jackets, hats in their hands.

"We thought your plane crashed," Mother said, her lipstick fresh and fiery and not precisely on her mouth.

"We thought you could take us to Sylvie's for lunch," said Dad, as if I'd just dropped in from down the street. His white hair was combed crisp, but he strained to hold his head up, his chin fell slack, his shoulders sagged, and his eyes looked huge and glassy behind thick lenses.

"Wait till you taste her Reuben," said Mother.

They stood patiently on the front stoop while I stashed my suitcase and went to the bathroom.

"I'll take the backseat," Dad announced once we were outside. He opened the front passenger door. I looked at the sliver of space between the front seat and the door jamb.

"Are you sure you can squeeze through there?" I asked.

He pushed forward the front seat, looking determined, a camel facing the needle's eye. "This way you and Mommy can talk," he said.

"You might have trouble getting out," I said.

He staggered backward, shrugged. "I thought you two needed to talk."

"Well, it's only three blocks," I said.

At that, Mommy, who seemed to have shrunk since I saw her last, slipped through the V-shaped opening like Houdini. It was fairly easy on the other end to grab her hands and drag her out.

When she took off her jacket in Sylvie's Café, I was surprised to see her mother's gold pendant on its heavy chain around her neck. I lifted it in my palm. "Hey, great, you found this," I said. "So where was it?"

"I think that boy must have brought it back," she said.

"She wants me to fire him anyway," Dad said. "She gets me to do all the dirty work."

"Your father ran over a cat," she told me. "It came darting out of nowhere, and he put on the gas."

"That is not a true statement," he told me. Our eyes met. His were full of questions—did I believe him, did I see what he was putting up with?

I smiled and let my gaze slip away.

"I don't like to cook anymore," she confessed as we began to eat our grilled sandwiches.

"A brand new stove and Mommy doesn't even use it. I'm living on cereal and peanut butter."

"Actually grains and nuts make as good a protein as meat," I said.

As mayor, he'd fought the forces of anti-government conservatism to apply for and obtain a federal grant for a se-

nior citizens' dining room. He personally delivered countless meals on wheels. But it would have been showing a dangerous weakness to pick up the phone and ask for help himself.

"When I think about food, I get butterflies," Mother said. "It makes me too sad."

The first night the new computerized stove almost defeated me. The instruction book was nowhere to be found, and it took a lot of trials and errors to get the thing to turn on. I fixed the meal which in the past our mother would have—lasagna and garlic bread. The aromas filled the house and lifted all our spirits, especially Dad's.

"Hey, Evvie," he sang as he sashayed stiffly into the kitchen, and made a stab at tickling her. "Do a little dance with goosey, goosey gander."

I set the table in the dining room, nicely with cloth napkins in pewter rings. I put the parmesan in its own pottery bowl, poured ice water into crystal glasses.

"Your father wouldn't know a sudden urge if it bit him," Mother confided when he had left us alone. "They just come over me and I want to move the sofa or put in all new roses or get on a bus heading south." As she complained, she gathered up the silverware I'd laid at each place. In two hands she bore the utensils back to the kitchen and slowly released them on the counter beside the sink. I felt a laugh welling up—the kind you cry at the end of. I'd been doing so well, being so neutral, impervious. I couldn't fall apart now. "Why don't we put these back at each place where they belong," I said.

"Of course," she answered.

I didn't check the table until it was time to sit down. Forks and knives lay in X's and V's down its center. The room hummed with a new, inscrutable code.

❧

The Noritake apple—larger than the real fruit, cast in two pieces, shiny red vessel and shiny red lid you lifted by a thin brown stem. Along with a silver coffee service, lacquer tables, prints framed in bamboo, and twelve place settings of Noritake dishes, our mother picked it up during our tour of duty in Japan after World War II, and its two halves had survived at least a dozen moves. In the beginning it held sugar cubes at informal dinner parties when the silver service might have been construed as showing off. Then little envelopes of fake sugar came along, and it dressed them up. Now as a prop in their denouement, it brimmed with pills: hormones, vitamins, our father's medications for Parkinson's disease, pills for depleted thyroids, pills for elevated blood pressure, pills for depressed souls. Every shape and shade of pill, all mixed together.

But Dad had this potentially confusing situation under control. He had created two legends on file cards, gluing a sample of each pill down the left margin and connecting it by dotted line to the dosage information on the right. He propped them between the salt and pepper shakers. The first morning of my visit, he and Mother studied the cards as if for the first time. Then with a strange sort of passion, they took turns fishing around in the apple, prolonging the tactile

pleasure of all those precious chemical stones sifting through their fingers. That apple promised answers—for every problem, a fix.

Despite surgery twice for diverticulitis, a bad day still doubled Dad over with abdominal pain. Two operations on the veins of his legs had left his size eleven feet so sensitive that he shuffled around in size thirteen Rockports. Our mother suffered from headaches and rampant anxiety that a cornucopia of medication barely touched.

Ten years before, we'd searched out the name of a top psychiatrist in St. Louis for her. We needed a wise man, possessed of a compassionate ear and some insight that just kept eluding us.

"Depression has nothing to do with life situation," he decreed. "It is the result of a chemical imbalance." The only way to correct it was with pills.

After a couple of months of them, Mother had phoned me. "My medicine's backing up on me," she'd said. "The doctor's going to change me to something else." Then the something else backed up on her. None of his *something else's* seemed to work. He played his last card—electroshock therapy—calling it the ace up his sleeve.

We children protested, pleaded for a second opinion. But here again was a pat answer. Dad urged her on. When she came home from the hospital afterwards, I stayed with her for a week, and over mugs of coffee at the kitchen table, we tried to reprise the gossipy analysis we used to fall into of family members and friends. She had trouble remembering

names. Between platitudes and *non sequiturs*, her hand wandered toward a cluster of bottles in the middle of the table. Some pills lay loose among them. Her fingers went for them reflexively, pinched them up, had lifted them to her mouth before I could stop her.

"You can't do that," I scolded. "You can't just take any old pill any old time."

Now ten years later, our parents moped and sometimes raged at their failure to be fixed, yet they still believed in the possibility of fixing. I could tell by the reverential way they assembled their allotment of pills from the Noritake apple.

I grasped each of them by the arm. "You're sure now you've got the right ones?"

Of course they were.

Dad took his one at a time in the order they appeared on the file card. Mother got an extra kick out of amazing me with her ability to swallow all hers in one gulp.

The next day I cooked and froze casseroles, banana bread, beef stew. I dictated instructions to Dad on how to defrost each dish, and he wrote every step down on a pad on his clipboard—underneath the page that reminded him how to set the VCR to tape old movies from TV. He was upbeat, in his element, nailing down a difficult procedure in written steps. And I was *stocking their larder*: the phrase cheered him as much as the fact.

Inspired by an influx of hope, he realized that what he and Mother needed was one place in the house where they could put anything of importance they had to be able to find

quickly—keys, receipts, gloves, my mother's purse, the flashlight, Clorets, instructions on working the stove. *A hoddy hole*, he called it.

He proposed the top drawer of an antique cabinet in the hall, where some important things already were, and we set about emptying it of things that didn't qualify, like old cough drops, candle stumps, wads of bent photographs, a balled up pair of pantyhose.

We were getting organized. They both vowed *no more frantic searches.* They would honor the principle of the *hoddy hole*. Make the extra effort to return things to it.

To top it off the next day, a man came out to disconnect the external alarm system. Dad could turn the key in his own door again without bringing on sirens, long distant phone calls, curious neighbors, patient police. Now he could say, "East, west, home is *Best*," the way he used to, with Mother and us children bumping up behind him, and feel it was true.

It was the last evening of the visit, Mother had gone to bed early, leaving Dad and me to watch his tape of *The Glenn Miller Story*, a film I admitted I'd never seen. I understood right away why he enjoyed Jimmy Stewart in this role—he must have recognized his own mix of humility and plain-talking irreverence—but June Allyson as the tirelessly competent kewpie helpmate seemed a painful mockery of the bewildered woman upstairs.

Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Miller's true love was about to conquer all, their hard work just beginning to pay off, when Dad killed the volume to say, "You know, Mommy sleeps a lot."

I said maybe she needed to.

"She slept thirty-seven hours last week."

I pointed out that was less than six hours a night.

"In a row."

All at the same time? Was he sure that many? On the screen in a monolithic dirndl skirt and high heels, June Allyson tended a bundle of newborn joy.

"So what did *you* do for thirty-seven hours?" I asked.

"Sat in the rocker and waited for her to wake up."

My brain jammed. Were her sleep and his resignation accidents? Shouldn't we be trying to prevent another? What was he talking about? I was supposed to ask questions, draw the information out of him, pronounce an emergency, promise to take action. I just wanted to go home.

There was a stubborn edge to his nonchalance. It reminded me of my brother Bill in his twenties, opening his collar to show me rope burns on his neck. Or bragging about the bottle of sedatives he'd amassed which he kept on his person at all times, just in case. Had we come to that?

"What are you trying to tell me?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Are you interested in watching any more of this?" he asked back, then clicked the screen dark. "He gets killed in the end."

"Could she have gotten hold of some sleeping pills?" I asked. "I didn't see a sleeping pill on those file cards."

"You should probably know that Mommy and I have

made a suicide pact," he said with an attempt at bravado, a last-ditch flourish.

I felt as if I'd caught them in an intimate act. *Please, cover your souls*, I wanted to say. Cathy would have called his bluff, asked what form the pact took, told him she would respect it, if that's what they'd decided. Chris would have cajoled him into denying serious intent.

All I could think was, *I can't be sucked in*. Tomorrow I could go home. "Are you saying it had something to do with that, her long sleep?"

He slumped in his chair, dropped his chin onto his chest. "How do I know?"

"Maybe you just lost track of the time."

"I can't get through to her. She's acting all on her own."

Thirty-seven hours. A measure of emptiness, a black hole I didn't want to go near. "Why didn't you push the button in the closet?" I snapped. "I think that's the sort of emergency it's there for."

The day I was leaving, they were scheduled to see Mother's latest psychiatrist, who had been prescribing antidepressants for them both. There was enough time before my flight that I could share their appointment and meet the doctor and his colleague in social work who gave each parent a half hour of talk therapy twice a month. I imagined we would all five sit down together and evaluate the situation. I knew I should mention what our father had told me the night before.

Since I was going to the airport right from the doctor's, we took separate cars. Dad drove the LTD with its scraped

fender, and I followed behind, a very slow micro-caravan of missed turns, doubling back, passing by the two-story, dingy brick storefront once, then going all the way around the block before pulling up in front. It was the sort of building where you'd expect loan companies and vacuum cleaner repair shops—a suite of frosted glass and crisp carpet, with a leggy philodendron on a Danish modern table, chairs with sagging seats, and the odor of wet wool.

I'd hated Mother's well-reputed psychiatrist at Barnes Hospital, his height and pleasant blandness, the obligatory navy blazer and grey slacks, his calm, barely inflected voice, his made-up mind: when his drugs then his plugs failed to work on her, it was somehow her fault.

Now here was her punishment, in a suit out of the seventies with wide lapels and flared trousers and a toupee. It was so shiny and black, it lowered his forehead so drastically—what could he be thinking? I gave him the benefit of the doubt, myself the benefit of a fantasy: maybe what we had here was a simple man, unpretentious and truly wise, whose top of the head was sensitive to cold, and who just didn't care what people thought. I was already on that flight to IAD. Getting cleared for departure.

He was the first of a number of doctors I would hear yell at our mother, assuming, I supposed, that all old people are deaf. His question was simply, "How are you today?" but I saw her flinch, put up her front, the way she did when Dad raised his voice and she was resolving to do whatever she had to do, say whatever she had to say, to get him to lower it.

"I think, better," she said softly and he gave her cheek a couple hard pats.

"Had any more of those headaches?"

"Maybe a few. They weren't so bad. I took some Tylenol."

This was what he wanted to hear. Now, did I have any questions?

"What might make my mother sleep for thirty-seven hours in a row?" I asked. He didn't want to hear that anymore than I did.

"Well, it all depends," he said. "When exactly did you see her sleep that long?"

"I didn't. My father told me."

"Oh, your father," he said, with a glance toward Mother that said *We shouldn't talk about these things around her.* Then he began yelling again. "So, Mrs. Best, you've been feeling a little tired lately?" A nod from her. "How about if you mention that to Mr. Anderson when you see him?"

When it was Dad's turn, the doctor approached him with the same loud cheeriness, but Dad would never have said that he was fine, Dad was always terrible. He got angry with Mother if she answered a casual inquiry into their health too automatically, without painting the extent of his misery. He claimed that he wanted people to know all about it so they wouldn't expect anything of him anymore. He said he wanted to be left alone. He was polishing the last chapter in the story of his life—a man dedicated to public service, elected mayor by a landslide, who had to step down in the middle of his second term because the obstinate stupidity of

his enemies broke his health. Now half-crippled with Parkinson's disease and chronic pain, he was the brigadier general of suffering, the mayor of unjust fate.

We still had to get through the half hour with the caring Mr. Anderson, in his shirtsleeves, argyle vest, and scuffed shoes. He had plenty of real hair and down-to-earth cowlicks and faith in positive thinking.

Were they stopping to smell the roses? he wanted to know. Were they turning off sad memories? Were they giving each other and themselves little treats? *Yes*, they said. *Yes*. They seemed pleased. The correct answer was more important than an accurate one.

The performance continued. Who was responsible for Bill's health? Not Evelyn. Who was responsible for Evelyn's sorrow? Not Bill. Mother agreed to think better of herself, then shed some obliging tears.

"Who is the one person in charge of your happiness?" Mr. Anderson asked her. That was a difficult one. Was she considering the expert over at Barnes, or his Medicare-bred version in the next room? Or was she tempted to try to explain how entangled our father's being was with her own? "It's yourself, isn't it, Mrs. Best?" coached Mr. Anderson. Mother conceded another *yes*.

Dad agreed to listen more tolerantly to Mother's feelings, then tried to explain his new concept of the hoddy hole. Mr. Anderson moved the discussion to the value of making lists. Finally Dad confessed, "We tend to wait a little long or cut a little short and then it all goes kerflooey."

By the time I brought up the question of Mother's thirty-seven-hour sleep, it seemed irrelevant at best, at worst, perverse, an attempt to spoil the pleasant mood that had filled in the cracks in the room. Mr. Anderson said something tactful and caring and jotted down the information. I considered asking him if he knew anything about a suicide pact, but then decided that would also be perverse. I decided I shouldn't be such a snob. Unfashionable clothing did not brand a person incapable of helping an elderly couple. They didn't need a superhuman intervention. They just needed mottoes enough to make it through each day.

I put away the thought that our mother might have been trying to die, that our father might have been willing to let her. When I reported the incident to Cathy and Chris, it had lost much of its solidity even as a probable accident.

I put away the fact that our parents *were* dying, and with them would go parts of ourselves. I put away all the doubts that start clamoring as life withers and the layers peel away from its vacant heart. I boarded my flight back to Washington, DC, with the same deep breath, the same righteous relief I'd always felt after a visit—*well, that's out of the way for a while.*

In less than a month, our mother would have to be hospitalized for seeing prostitutes with white-painted faces and cats chewing up the bedclothes and defecating in her food. She would claim not to know our father, and, hurt and confused to the core, he would begin to refer to her as *somebody*, as in "Somebody doesn't want to have anything to do with

me anymore," or as *him*, as in "We're having him watched," or even, inexplicably, as *Max*, as in "You can tell from the pictures that Max is dead."

After dozens of impossible phone calls, Chris and Cathy would take turns flying out to St. Louis. Finally Chris would arrange to have them airlifted to an Air Force base in North Carolina, where he would pick them up and drive them the four hours to his home in Durham, where they could be tested by doctors he was familiar with, our mother's drugs could be monitored, the antidepressants she'd been popping at whim could be cut back, and our father could get some rest.

Cathy and I would come down to help with their various medical appointments, after which she and I would transport them to her house in Virginia for several weeks, while Chris and I flew back to Illinois to pack up their house and get it on the market. At the same time we would put in their application to a new facility in Durham for something called *continuing life care*. We were executing plans as fast as we could devise them.

Cathy was driving the four of us toward Virginia, Dad in the shotgun seat, when he attempted clarity: "I'm going to tell you now because I always forget: Mommy has two sicknesses and I have one other diagnosis. Mommy's is Alzheimer's and the other is what, sweetie?" When Mother didn't answer but stared resolutely out her back window, our father and commanding officer tried to rally us. "We're going to lick this all by standing together," he said in a thin voice. "The only difficulty is, am I here and is Mommy there?"