

Two Out of Three

“Book. Lamp. Table.”

The homecare assessment nurse enunciates carefully, her easy Carolina drawl opening the vowels and turning *lamp* into *lay-ump*. Her large dark eyes narrow slightly with the effort to be precise and professional.

“Book. Lamp. Table,” she repeats. Her name is Charmaine, accent on the first syllable. Charmaine is tall, angular, and dark-skinned with tight black hair woven into intricate cornrows. She’s sitting at the small kitchen table in Edith Mullen’s cluttered apartment, surrounded by nice antiques and stacks of junk mail.

Across the table, Edith settles her considerable 91-year-old backside firmly into the seat of her red-cushioned wheelchair. She hunches forward, resting pale, blotchy forearms on the table’s stained burlwood. Her thin lips, startlingly pink and a little crooked, silently mouth the same three words as she regards Charmaine.

They lock eyes and lean toward each other over the small table: the slender young black woman in crisp blue nurse’s scrubs and the wizened old white woman in her pink polyester pantsuit.

Behind them, Edith's younger sister Jenna is propped against the kitchen counter. She's dressed in baggy jeans, sandals, and a worn t-shirt. A single plume of silver ponytail, wrenched back and bound with a rubber band, hangs limply on her neck. Jenna crosses her bare ankles and keeps an eye on the old table, ready to leap to the rescue if its fold-up leaves give way.

A shaft of thin spring sunlight slants from the narrow window across the room. Charmaine squints a little in the dusty light, then smiles encouragingly. "You can remember those three words, right, Miz Edith? I'll ask you to say them again in a few minutes. It's a little memory game, helps me figure out how you're doing, all right? Book, lamp, table."

Edith's wispy, over-permed white hair flutters a little in the ceiling fan's sluggish breeze. She forms the words again, practicing, then repeats slowly, "Book. Lamp. Table," pausing after each word and attempting to copy Charmaine's southern inflection.

Then Edith abandons the fake drawl. "Book! Lamp! Table!" Delighted, she slaps the tabletop sharply with both palms, making it vibrate. "Got it! Like a BLT! Book, lamp, table!"

Startled, Charmaine jerks back a little. "Very good, Miz Edith." She lifts her slim manicured hands, palms outward, as if to calm a manic puppy.

Jenna shifts herself off the counter and crouches to inspect the underside of the old table. It's a family heirloom, not designed for rough handling. She checks the leaf braces, then repositions a wobble-correcting napkin wedged under one foot of the table.

The nurse ignores the woman under the table, and continues. "Just a few more questions, Miz Edith. Can you tell me a little about your parents? When and where was your momma born?"

Edith pats her frizzy, flown-away hair and launches into a story. "Oh, our mother's name was Villa, rhymes with Willa but starts with a V. I bet you've never heard that one before. Isn't

that so pretty? It means a grand house in Spanish, because her grandfather was a sea captain and he sailed all over, so to speak, down to places like South America, and his ship was named—”

Jenna crawls out from beneath the table, stretches a kink out of her back, and returns to her place by the sink. “Edie,” she says gently, “can you please just answer the questions? Charmaine asked you when Mother was born. And where.”

“I was getting there,” Edith snaps. “And she asked *me*, not you. There’s nothing wrong with my hearing. The ship was named the *Villa Maria*. April 23, 1909, she was born, but I don’t know where. They all traveled a lot. And there were so many of them. All over.”

“Mother was one of twelve children,” Jenna informs Charmaine. “We actually aren’t sure where Mom was born. The family bible had her birth date but not the location. Somewhere in Vermont or Massachusetts, I’d guess, or maybe Nova Scotia where Grandpa was from.”

Charmaine looks from Edith to Jenna. “Thank you, Miz Jenna, but I need Miz Edith to tell me what she can recall.” Jenna shrugs in apology. Okay, she thinks, you can sort out the next storm of pronouns on your own.

Edith shoots a dark look at her sister. “It was somewhere they speak French, I know that. She spoke French. Though she had that Spanish name. But she learned that in school, the French. She was very smart, so to speak.”

Charmaine is confused but she presses on. “Miz Edith, was your mother Hispanic?”

“No, good heavens, of course not,” Edith shakes her head emphatically. “I have blue eyes, see? We all do. She was Vermont. Or maybe Canada, that’s where Nova Scotia is, isn’t it?”

“Okay. And when did your momma pass?”

“Oh, yes!” Edith smiles broadly, showing a mouth of yellow dentures and crooked teeth. “Mother was so smart, she was brilliant. She passed all her classes early and then she skipped

two grades, went right into high school. That's why he thought she was so much older. But then she met him and got married, and never graduated high school, so to speak."

Charmaine is looking truly lost, so Jenna offers to translate again. "Edie, Miz Charmaine asked about when Mother *passed on*, not when she passed her classes or why Dad thought she was older. The question is, when she died." She hefts a jumbled stack of magazines and catalogs from a second kitchen chair, and sits beside her sister's wheelchair.

"Oh, well, then," Edith frowns. "She should've said so. Still she was that smart, like I said. But she died in 1964."

Jenna suppresses a sigh. "No, Edie, Dad died in 1964, Mother in 1984."

Charmaine tries to recover control. "Miz Jenna, please, I need Miz Edith to say it."

Edith scowls at Jenna, then says, "It was a long time ago. Daddy died so young, when he was only 64. We kids were all in our late thirties when Daddy died."

Jenna shakes her head. "Edie, I was in eighth grade. You were 36 when Dad died, but I was only 13."

Edith and Charmaine both stare at Jenna.

"No," Edith said, "That can't be right. Jenna, you were in college, I know that. And pregnant." She scowls, and thumps the table with a closed fist for emphasis.

"No," Jenna repeats. "I was 13. And not pregnant."

Charmaine abandons her script and turns to Jenna. "You're *how* many years younger than Miz Edith?"

"Twenty-three years. Mom got married at 15, Dad was 24." Jenna speaks rapidly, hoping to get through this detour quickly so they can wrap it up. They're already a half-hour late for lunch. "Mom had four kids by the time she was 20. Twenty-one years later, they had me. Same

parents, same farmhouse, same high school, even the same art teacher. I had two brothers and two sisters, but they were all grown and gone by then. Edith was third of those four, I'm number five. Now everyone else is gone. Edith and I are the only ones left."

Not the whole story, Jenna thinks, but it's all you need.

The longer version would include more fascinating details, like the part about Mom getting pregnant a month after her fifteenth birthday by a man almost ten years older. There was always the question of who had seduced whom, back in 1924 when respectable young women absolutely did not have sex before marriage.

"So...if Miz Edith is ninety-one, you're... sixty-eight?" Charmaine stares at Jenna.

Edith looks blank. Jenna nods. "Yeah. The age Dad would have been when his youngest daughter—me— graduated high school. If he'd lived."

"But she's talking to *me*," Edith interjects sharply. "This is *my* story. And the best part is this! Now my baby sister has moved near me, and now we are getting to know each other. And I'm just *tickled to death*." She flashes her open-mouthed smile, lifts her head and begins trilling in a tremulous off-key soprano, "Getting to know you, getting to know all about you..." She breaks off singing and adds triumphantly, "See, now I get to learn all about my little baby sister. *All* about her, everything I missed before. And she's learning everything about *me!*"

Oh, Edie, Jenna thinks, you can't know. You simply weren't there. Not that time after Dad died, when I was fourteen and I ran away from home. You missed my high school and college graduations, never met my first fiancé. Missed all three weddings, one abortion, the divorces, my son's birth, and all the rest of the first sixty-five years of my life. So no, you can't know me. And whatever you *do* know about me, you don't really approve of.

What Jenna says, in a mild and pleasant voice, is: “I always thought that song was creepy. No one can know *all* about anyone.”

Edith’s winning smile flattens and vanishes. She glares angrily at her younger sister. Abruptly, she leans over the table, reaching for Jenna’s ponytail with one gnarled hand. Jenna tilts her chair back, staying just out of reach.

“Jenna,” Edith scolds, “you mustn’t ever pull your hair back behind your ears like that. Ears are ugly, they detract from your face. Where are your earrings? Ladies wear earrings, and they hide their ears with their hair so the ugly parts are covered. You need a proper haircut, so to speak. Comb your pretty hair forward to cover your ears and spray it in place. A permanent wave would help. Or you could just wear one of my wigs, that would look nice. While we’re on the topic, your pants are baggy—”

“No, thank you,” Jenna looks away, tamping down the instinct to lash back. “I’m happy with how I look. I like my jeans and my hair is fine. *So to speak.*” She glances pointedly at the clock over the kitchen sink.

“Sorry,” she says softly to Charmaine. “We don’t want to miss our lunch.”

The nurse’s eyes are wide. Her eyebrows have risen almost into her neatly braided hair, and she’s ready to flee. Caught in the middle of a battle she can’t possibly understand, she chooses strategic retreat. She pats Edith’s hand reassuringly and gathers her paperwork, then pushes back her chair and looks for the door.

“You have such interesting stories, Miz Edith,” Charmaine says briskly, “and you must be so happy to have your baby sister here, now, where she can visit and help you like she does. Thank you, I do believe I’m about done.”

Edith slips her sociable face back on, preparing to be gracious with her goodbyes.

Charmaine closes her notebook, zips up the case that holds the blood pressure cuff, and stands. “Tomorrow I’ll write up my report,” she says, “and the office will get back to you real soon on your homecare claim, Miz Edith. Then we can set up that extra help you’re needing. For bathing and dressing, housework and such. I know Miz Jenna helps you a couple days a week but she can’t do everything. You need more help, every day.

“One last question, Miz Edith. Do you remember those three words I asked you to memorize?”

Edith stares up at Charmaine, mouth open and trembling. “What words? I know the Lord’s Prayer. Those words? ‘Our Father who art—’”

“Those three words we worked on memorizing, earlier.”

Edith looks to her sister, hoping for help but finding none. She closes her eyes tightly and twists her gnarled, arthritic hands together on the table. “Chair,” she says. Desperation creeps in. “No, no, not chair. Lamp. Lamp and paper, book? Yes, book! BLP? No, no, can’t eat that, not paper.”

The old woman sits in frustrated silence, angry and defeated, unable to dredge the third word from her chaotic memory.

“That’s okay, Miz Edith,” Charmaine pats her shoulder reassuringly. “You did real good. You got two out of three, that’s good.”

The caseworker gathers her jacket and case, gives Jenna a sympathetic nod, and leaves, closing the apartment door gently behind her.

Furious, Edith spins her wheelchair back from the table and glares at Jenna. “That woman tricked me!” she shouts. “I remembered everything just fine until she distracted me, we were

having a nice chat, I thought we were done, and then she did that to me when I thought we were all finished! That's what she did, she tricked me so I failed! And you were *no help whatsoever!*"

Jenna sighs and stands. "She was just doing her job, Edie, not trying to trick you. I wasn't supposed to help at all. Here, I'm putting together a sandwich. You want ham and cheese or chicken salad with lettuce-tomato?"

The question of food catches Edith's attention, as Jenna knows it would. "Chicken! I love chicken salad." Just like that, the anger is gone, swamped beneath a new confetti storm of memory fragments. "Mom made the best chicken salad, and roast chicken, too, didn't she? I remember all the chickens we had on the farm when we were kids. We traded eggs to other people, even traded a dozen chickens for a goat, once. I liked gathering eggs, but I don't like chickens. Stupid, smelly things. Especially in the summer when it rains because the chicken coop gets so stinky, so to speak, and Daddy made the boys clean it out and they hated that. Remember?"

Jenna is poking through the refrigerator. She finds mayonnaise, days-old white bread, a cooked chicken breast, limp lettuce, no tomatoes. She makes a mental note to give the fridge a good cleaning, then locates a dull knife and small cutting board. She begins shredding chicken.

"Remember? About the chickens?" Edith insists.

"No, Edie." Jenna suppresses a sigh. "Not really. You were gone, the boys were gone. The chickens got sold off when I was four, I think. But," Jenna adds, "Speaking of the chickens, I do remember the story that Mother always told me about the chicken coop and your wedding."

"What story? Was it a funny story?" Edith tips her head to one side.

She looks, Jenna thinks, rather like a bright-eyed broody hen. Age had pulled the skin on Edith's face back against the skull, defining the bones, and her hairline had retreated, showing

pink scalp. Below, gravity had pulled the bulk of her torso downward into a large middle mass of belly and bottom, with skinny legs beneath.

Yes, a broody hen settled on her nest, ready to protect a flock of imaginary chicks. Her face is expectant, alert, slightly suspicious. Ready for anything, to be attacked or entertained or flattered, or distracted with food or stories. Bread and circuses. That's where I'll be too, I guess, in twenty years.

"Really? You don't remember, from your own wedding?" Jenna says. "Mom told me over and over, not because it was funny but because she held that grudge against Dad for the rest of his life. I can't believe you forgot. It was your wedding day, Edie, in June, right? 1954? When you married Walt? And they hosted the reception at the farmhouse. I was the flower girl, I was only three so I don't remember anything. Mom said that Dad decided to clean out the big chicken coop the day before the wedding. He shoveled all the smelly chicken shit into the manure spreader and hauled it out to the fields, but the manure spreader leaked all over the driveway and the whole place stank to high heaven. There was no way to clean it up, the wedding guests arrived, and everyone tried to ignore the smell. It was a farm, after all."

Edith is shaking her head harder and harder as Jenna talks. Then she snaps, "I know nothing about that! And *do not use* that filthy language around me, young lady!"

Jenna slaps chicken salad onto stale bread and blithely continues, "Mom said she was so mortified, she was so mad at Dad that she didn't talk to him for *a week*. Of all the dumb times to clean the coop, he had to do it *then*? And Walt's mother, your mother-in-law, what was her name, Dorothy? She was so high-society, an old-money Mayflower descendant, granddaughter of a Massachusetts governor. She didn't want her son Walt marrying the farmer's daughter anyway—"

“*No! It did not happen that way!*” Edith’s voice rises in fury, and tears glaze her eyes. “Our wedding was perfect, Walt and I were so happy, it was a beautiful day in June! Everyone should have a June wedding! Look at the pictures. I was so pretty, that day.”

“Uh-huh. But every time *Mom* looked at your wedding pictures, it reminded her of that smell and she told me that story. And,” Jenna adds, “I’m sixty-eight years old. By now, I can say ‘shit’ if I want to.”

Edith twists her face away. “Why are you here? I don’t want you here if you’re going to tell lies and use filthy language.”

“Because you need someone to help you. I’m all the family you’ve got left. And you pay me.”

Edith sets her mouth in a furious narrow line. In silence, Jenna serves their sandwiches and pours two glasses of milk. She’s regretting that last bit, about getting paid. Though it’s true.

With the food in front of her, Edith shakes herself like a hen fluffing off dust. She smiles her sweet-child smile, and picks up her sandwich. “That is the prettiest amaryllis, isn’t it? I do love a spot of red in the room, so to speak.” Mouth full of chicken salad, she points a finger at the windowsill where a glass tumbler holds a wad of sphagnum moss and a stalk of bright green with four brilliant scarlet blooms, a flowering bulb that Jenna had brought a few weeks earlier.

Jenna sighs and sits next to her sister. We share blood and not much else, she thinks.

They had never lived together or even spent more than a few hours in each other’s company until a year earlier, when Edith’s husband had died. Childless, Edith had invited Jenna to move nearby and offered her a small stipend to help around the house, a couple of days a week. Jenna—divorced, living alone, with her one grown son working abroad—figured it was a good opportunity to strengthen family ties, maybe find some hidden truths about her little-known

siblings and long-gone parents. A chance to locate a few richer threads in the tapestry that she was bound into, but had never felt a part of.

What Jenna had gained in that year, along with several shifting versions of maybe-real family stories, was the suspicion that her older sister had probably always skated on the far edge of truth. Every visit with Edith included some sort of verbal barrage, a slew of distracting non sequiturs, casual criticisms, and unverifiable reminiscences. The random chatter and rapidly shifting moods, fueled by age and untethered impulses, created a cognitive whiplash that left Jenna feeling manipulated and exhausted. To comb through all that clutter, in search of small truths about herself, her family, or anything else? Not worth it.

So now the topic is flowers, which Jenna figures is safe enough. Edith natters on through lunch, speaking of vases and past floral arrangements and how much she loves sunflowers. She falls silent, briefly, while Jenna gathers the plates and fills the sink with soapy dishwater. Then, disliking a conversational vacuum, Edith launches into her favorite topic, the rhetorical tale of *Our Perfect Childhood*.

“We had the best parents ever, didn’t we? And the best life on the farm. What a wonderful place to grow up, out there in God’s green country, so to speak. Couldn’t have been more perfect, could it?” She looks to Jenna for agreement. Jenna knows she’s supposed to chime in, offer affirmation, to say oh yes, absolutely, the best childhood, the best parents, we were so fortunate. Yes, it was God’s country. Remember the wild blueberries we picked, the strawberries that Daddy planted, the corn that grew so tall, the kittens born in the haymow. She isn’t sure where Edie is going with it this time, but Jenna is tired of being spoken to as if she were a simple child, or an echo chamber, or whatever Edie needs her to be. Not today. She just doesn’t have the energy to produce or consume that much sugar.

Jenna drains the sink. “Edie,” she answers, “maybe you do remember how it was lovely and perfect, but you all had a hard life during the Depression. The boys fought in the Aar. Dad had a thing for Mom’s younger sister. Everyone thought he was a pretty good farmer but terrible with money.

“After he lost the farm, he spent the family savings on grand ideas that didn’t work. He tried selling insurance but failed at that! That’s when Mom had to go to work as a lunch lady at the high school. Finally Dad got a job as a janitor so at least he had health insurance when he got cancer.” Jenna doesn’t intend to sound cranky or spiteful, but she’s pretty much worn out and her own filters are starting to fail.

“I don’t remember any of that!”

“Of course not. That last part, after the farm got sold, that was during *my* childhood, not yours. I think I had a good childhood, and I believe Mom and Dad loved all of us and probably loved each other the best they could, and we all learned the value of hard work and a good education and how to tell right from wrong, mostly. But it wasn’t ever *perfect*. And gods don’t have countries, as far as I know, so I really don’t get that part.”

Edith looks away, her mouth set in a stubborn line.

As Jenna sponges crumbs off the table, Edith catches her wrist in one gnarled hand and holds on tightly.

“Jenna,” she says fiercely, “You always were a contrary child. That’s why I moved away when you were two. Why are you always so angry and disagreeable? Why can’t you *just agree with me*? I don’t *want* to remember anything bad or hurtful. I only want to talk about nice things, pretty things!”

Jenna lets her wrist go limp despite the sharp fingernails digging into her skin. “I guess,” she sighs, “what I want to hear is something true. Something I can hold onto. Life isn’t pretty, most of the time. We learn from the tough parts. The way you tell it, everything was always so perfect and sweet and lovely. But I know it wasn’t.”

Edith is silent for several seconds. She lets go of Jenna’s arm and folds her hands on the table in front of her. “Well, then,” she says with a secretive smile. “You do know why Mom got pregnant, right?”

Whiplashed again. Damn, it’s hard to keep up.

Since Edith might now offer information on something more substantial than sunflowers, Jenna searches her memory for something to contribute.

“Well,” Jenna begins, “Mom told me she got pregnant that first time when she was barely fifteen, with Martha, because she wanted to get away from caring for all those babies at home, her little sisters and brothers. If she was going to take care of babies, she said, they should be her own. She wanted to marry a farmer, Dad was a handsome young farmer, and I guess she figured that was a good way to catch him. At the time Dad had another girlfriend, Lucille, right? That his family thought he would marry. Mom was pretty proud that he married *her* instead of Lucille.”

Jenna rattles on, recounting their mother’s story. “Then she had the next three, Allen and you and Charlie. She said she didn’t know anything about birth control, which was of course illegal back then. But an aunt finally told her about getting a diaphragm, so she did, and so no more babies. Two decades later, Mom figured she was nearing menopause, so she didn’t always remember her diaphragm, and at age 41 she got pregnant one more time—surprise!—and there I was, one more to raise, after the family was already complete.”

Jenna stacks the dried plates on a shelf over the sink and wonders fleetingly why they're discussing Mom's pregnancies. Would Edith next ask about Jenna's three ex-husbands and try to glean personal details about her wild life during the sixties? As part of "getting to know all about you?" Surely not.

"She got pregnant with you," Edith intones dramatically, "to save her marriage."

"What?"

"It was Daddy's old girlfriend, Lucille. He never forgot her. He and Mother had been married twenty-five years, working on the farm, raising us—but Daddy never forgot Lucille. He always wrote to her, she wrote back. She got married and moved to Virginia. Then her husband died, maybe 1948 or '49. Dad told Mom he wanted a divorce so he could go marry Lucille. We four were grown up. Martha was married, Allen was in college, Charlie and I had jobs, I was engaged. It was just Mom and Dad at home. Dad figured he'd done his duty by our family, twenty-five years was enough."

Edith's voice is steady and clear. She's rehearsed this.

Jenna chucks the dish towel onto the counter, returns to the table and sits with a thump. "Wait," she says, "Dad wanted a divorce?"

"Yes, exactly," Edith continues. "So Mother got pregnant one more time. With you. So then he couldn't leave. You got born and saved the family! Although Lucille wouldn't have him anyway. She turned him down, wouldn't be a homewrecker.

"So you see, Jenna," Edith concludes with an air of triumph, "I do know a few things about you, that you don't even know, so to speak. Mother told me, right after you were born. See, everything happens for a purpose! You were the miracle baby! What do you think about *that*?"

Jenna frowns, thinking. "I hadn't heard that story before." She shrugs. "It's pretty sad, actually. I feel bad for Dad, living all those years in one family but always wishing he'd married Lucille instead. He must have felt trapped. And I'm sad for Mom, too, that she thought she had to use pregnancy to keep him tied down. I guess she felt she had no other options. Yeah, that's a sad story, if it's true, but it doesn't leave me with a real good feeling about our family."

"What do you mean '*if it's true*'? And you're *missing the point!*" Edith shouts, frustrated. "It's not a *story*, it's the truth and it's not sad, it's wonderful! It's about how Mom was so clever, she was able to hang on to the man she loved, she found a way to keep the family together! Babies are supposed to be wanted and you were wanted! God caused you to be born to save the family! That's why we all were so happy when you were born, why we all loved you!"

Jenna gazes at the stranger in the wheelchair, this angry old woman that everyone says is her sister. Was *this* her origin story, being born into a family of schemers, people living small lives of regret and quiet desperation?

"Let's leave gods and miracles out of it," Jenna finally says. "If that's the way it happened, it was Mother's plan, not God's or anyone else's. But you're saying I accomplished this grand purpose in life just *by getting born*? And nothing much mattered afterwards? And *that's* the reason you love me?"

"And," Jenna adds, "if Lucille turned him down, was I even necessary?"

"I don't know that! But you were loved! And Mother was happy and Dad stayed, so the rest of us didn't have to worry about them getting divorced. Like I said, *that's what mattered most*. But," she adds more quietly, "I'm sorry, you must have been so lonely!"

Jenna stares at her sister for a long moment, then sighs deeply and slumps back in her chair. "Actually, Dad must have found some way to make peace with Mom and everything else,

because I always felt loved by both of them, and yes, I had a good childhood. I liked being the only child, but of course I didn't know any different. I was so spoiled, wasn't I? They made the best of it, they sacrificed for me when they could. I got toys and attention, my own pony, swimming and music lessons, trips to the museums. I'm sure you four older ones were jealous. I didn't have to share anything! But I was never lonely. Alone, yes, I was often alone. I preferred to be alone, most of the time. I still do. But lonely? No, never."

Jenna pauses, then adds a little more kindly, "Edie, I'm sorry you didn't share that part of my life. There's really no way to do that, is there? No way to catch up."

Edith's eyes fill with tears. "Of course you were spoiled. You were the *special one*. And we *are* catching up."

She wipes the back of one hand over her eyes and sits up straighter. "You know, the reason my wedding reception was so memorable, the reason Mother was so very angry with Daddy, was because my mother-in-law, Dorothy, that high-society lady as you call her, she *stepped in it*. In the *chicken shit*. Yes, Mother spoke of that *every time* she looked at my wedding pictures. I do remember, of course I do. But I choose not to."

"I know," Jenna nods. Her voice softens. "And Edie, it's book, lamp, table." She places an arm awkwardly around her sister's thin, bony shoulder and gives her a small hug. "It's book, lamp, table. Next time, you'll remember."