

Waiting

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She shuffled, bent and gray toward the bathroom. The nurse had just come to wake her for a pill and so, Barbara decided to get up and begin her day. The bathroom was just 20 steps away in her tiny, dark room, but it might as well have been a mile. The soreness and stiffness were always worse in the morning. Barbara's doctors told her to keep moving, but there were days when that seemed impossible. She prevailed, however, and managed to keep moving despite her 94 years, worn joints and bad feet. She had wondered more than once the last couple of years, why she did keep going. Her friends had all passed away and her family was gone except for the young ones, and they didn't care if she existed.

Today, however, was to be a good day. Barbara's niece, Karen, was coming to spend the day. Barbara had moved into Assisted Living over 4 years ago, a present for her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday! Although it wasn't a bad place, it was lonely. No one in her family came to visit and the phone calls, which came regularly when she first moved in, were now sporadic and sparse. Karen had called last week to tell her that she would be stopping to see her on her way to her daughter's house. Barbara felt a bit guilty that Karen was going to have to spend the night in a hotel and delay her visit with her daughter and grandchildren by one day, but Karen insisted. Now that the day had arrived, Barbara found she was excited at the prospect of a visitor.

As Barbara came out of the bath room she heard the wall clock chime seven o'clock. She smiled. She couldn't always hear the chime unless she was sitting in her recliner, looking directly at the clock. But this morning she heard it loud and clear. Barbara's husband, Tom, had made the pendulum wall clock for their twentieth anniversary. Tom worked for the railroad and the clock was an appropriate gift, given the trains' reputation for punctuality. Barbara had worried when she moved into her one-room apartment that the clock wouldn't find a place, but

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Karen made sure it was hung where Barbara could see and hear it when she sat in her chair. Karen was an interior decorator and had helped place all Barbara's favorite furniture in the room. The result was a room that was a source of pride for the complex. When new people were looking to move in, Barbara's place was always shown as an example of gracious living. At first, Barbara had been proud of the attention, now it was just a bother. Barbara didn't like extra attention.

Growing up on a rural farm in West Virginia in the 1920's, there wasn't money for dentists and braces. Barbara hated her crooked teeth and lopsided smile. She wore bright colors and tried to make sure her clothes were well designed in hopes people would notice them and not her smile or short, straight, thin hair. She had learned to sew so she could have more options than she might otherwise be able to afford. She ran her hand through her hair and wondered if it would look okay today. There was a beauty parlor in her building, but the lady there didn't seem to know what to do with Barbara, so she kept her hair cut really short. Barbara hated that, but didn't have any choice. When she was a little girl, Barbara's mother gave her perms in the hope that there would be a least some body and wave, but it never really worked and Barbara hadn't had a perm since she was 18.

"Miss Barbara?" a voice outside the door called.

"Yes?"

"Just wanted to make sure you were awake." Bess came into the room with a small tray containing the rest of Barbara's morning medications. "Going to be a pretty day today. I hear you are having company?"

Barbara nodded. "Yes, my niece is coming this afternoon for a visit."

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“Well, that will be nice. I know she hasn’t been here in a while.” Bess set the tray down on the kitchenette counter and handed the little paper cup to Barbara and then the glass of water to wash the pills down. Bess was one of the newer nurses at the Assisted Living Center and Barbara like her and hoped she would stay. So many nurses came and went here.

Barbara handed the glass back to Bess. “She leads a very busy life.”

“I hear you on that!” With that, Bess turned, picked up her tray and went out the door.

If the nurses knew Karen was coming, then everyone in the building would also know. Barbara considered skipping breakfast this morning because all the ladies at her table would ask all kinds of questions.

Karen had been very specific when she called. “Go ahead and follow your normal schedule Aunt Barbara. Since I’m driving, I don’t know exactly what time I will get there. And traffic can always be a factor.” Barbara resigned herself to the fact she would have to endure the questions at breakfast and again at lunch if Karen hadn’t arrived.

Barbara opened the closet door and chose her outfit for the day. She only wore pants because of the shoes her sore feet forced her to wear. She knew she shouldn’t be so vain, at least she could get up and down the halls without a walker or a cane, unlike most of the people in the building. But she hated that she had to wear lace-up old lady shoes. The podiatrist had told her years ago that these orthopedic shoes would be the only way she would have the support she needed to continue to walk. She chose black pants and a cream colored sweater. She had several patterned jackets that would match this pairing, so she chose one with red. Karen once remarked that Barbara looked good in red.

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After finding jewelry to match, she headed out the door and down the hall toward the dining room.

“Good morning, Barbara,” a raspy voice behind her called.

Barbara turned to see Kiki. Kiki was a large woman who lived 2 doors down the hall from Barbara. She pushed a walker to get around the building and delighted in covering the metal frame with artificial flowers and other decorations for the season. Today there were snowflakes hanging from the rails.

“Good morning, Kiki,” Barbara replied.

“I hear you are having a visitor today. Aren’t you all dolled up!”

“Yes. My niece is to come sometime today.” Barbara wished she didn’t have to slow down so Kiki could keep up with her. Kiki’s breath was very labored and it made Barbara uncomfortable.

“I wish I was having a visitor. You’re lucky your family still comes to see you.”

Barbara just nodded at that. She knew that most of the folks in her building never had visitors. Barbara felt a little guilty that she was feeling sorry about sharing the experience with her fellow residents. “It is nice, isn’t it?”

The two women continued down the hall following the smells of eggs and ham and found their table mates. After everyone had checked the menus for breakfast options, the questions began. The women at the table were curious about Barbara’s visitor and what activities were planned. Barbara tried to be as open and forthcoming as she could.

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After breakfast, Barbara decided to walk straight back to her room. Sometimes after breakfast she would make a loop around the building to get some exercise. That usually led to meeting more people in the halls and she really didn't want to share anymore personal information. She was sure that Karen wouldn't arrive this early, but in case she tried to call, it might be wise to stay close to the room. Barbara had felt very tired this morning, more than usual, so when she sat down in her comfy green chair, she was relieved to put her feet up.

Karen was Barbara's older brother – James' – daughter. Barbara was one of 6 children and all her siblings had large families. Barbara had 15 nieces and nephews, but only Karen had come to visit in the four years she had been here. The others called from time to time, but it wasn't the same as seeing them. Barbara and Tom didn't have children of their own, so most of her nieces and nephews had spent vacations with Barbara when they were young. All were married now, with children of their own, and very busy lives. Barbara was thankful for Karen's attention and wished she could do more to thank her. Growing up in a small town with so many cousins around had made Barbara long for a family of her own, when that didn't happen, she tried to incorporate her nieces and nephews into her life. Barbara missed having family close.

The clock chimed and Barbara leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Hearing the clock always brought a flood of memories. Tom had been a big man, 6 feet 4 inches, to Barbara's tiny frame. She stood 4 feet 10 inches in her stocking feet. Now that she was old, she doubted that she reached 10 inches, probably more like 6 inches. Tom passed away from brain cancer 15 years ago and when Barbara realized that her eyesight was getting bad, she knew it was time to move into an Assisted Living facility to be cared for until she joined Tom and her parents. She didn't mind dying, right now living was pretty tough with no one in the family to support her and no one who really cared about the stories she had to tell. She knew that when she

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passed on there would be no one left in the family that would know her parents' generation or really even her own generation.

Growing up there had been so many cousins, aunts and uncles. Every Sunday the whole family would go to her grandparents' house for dinner. But when World War II broke out, all of Barbara's older brothers and the other male cousins left to enlist in the army. She was left home with her mother, sick father and baby brother. Barbara was a senior in high school and had dreams of going to college and becoming a doctor or a nurse. James had promised to send her money to pay for college. He promised that when he came home from the war she could leave.

But, when the war was over her brothers never came home. Two had died in the war, and the other two went to nearby cities to make their fortunes. They married and had families and Barbara was left at home to help with the farm. Barbara hadn't minded helping, and when she met Tom and they married, he took a job with the railroad and they moved every couple of years. Barbara's dream of school and a career in medicine vanished. By this time her father had died and her mother was fighting cancer. Barbara spent most of her early years of marriage traveling back and forth to look after her mother until she passed away. By that time her other siblings were well on their way to careers and families and Barbara was again, left behind.

Barbara tried to stay close to her remaining family by taking her nieces and nephews for a couple of weeks every summer. By the time they were in high school and unable or unwilling to come see her, she began to lose touch with them as well. Karen was different, though. She and Barbara had a love of sewing and cooking and even through college Karen would call Barbara and they would make time to visit and get together. Then, Barbara and Tom moved to Florida to retire and Barbara lost touch with Karen. It would be many years later before the two would reconnect.

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Barbara opened her eyes and realized she had fallen asleep. The clock chimed eleven o'clock and Barbara struggled to get out of her chair. She brushed through her hair with her hands and walked out into the hallway and down to the main desk. Darla was sitting there and looked up.

“Hi Barbara. What can I do for you?”

“Well, it seems I sat down in my chair and fell asleep after breakfast. I wondered if I had missed a call or anything.”

Darla looked at a paper pad in front of her. “No, I don't see anything. Are you expecting someone?”

Barbara laughed. “You must be the only one who doesn't know. My niece, Karen, is on her way here. She didn't know exactly what time she might arrive.”

“That explains why you look so nice today.” Darla smiled at Barbara. Barbara was one of her favorite residents. Barbara was one of the oldest, but she still had all her faculties and always made pleasant conversation. The other residents could be testy and not always coherent. “Of course, you always look nice Miss Barbara, but you look especially good today.”

“Thank you.” Barbara turned to return to her room. She stopped at her mailbox on the way and found nothing in the box this morning. It didn't really matter, with her deteriorating eye sight, she couldn't read most mail anyway. Barbara had always been so attentive in sending birthday, Christmas, and get well cards that it bothered her that she couldn't do it anymore. Her handwriting was so bad that no one could read it and she couldn't see the addresses in her book to write them down. It made her especially angry that she couldn't write a decent thank you note. In her day, writing notes was a very important characteristic of manners and curtesy.

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Barbara sat down in her chair once again. She could feel the sunshine coming through her window and it warmed her. For some reason today, Barbara felt cold and tired. She had to laugh at herself, “Well, you are 94 after all!”

The hall nurse rapped on Barbara’s door and stuck her head in. “Can I come in and get your vitals?”

“Sure,” Barbara said.

The nurse pushed her cart into the entry/kitchen area of the room. “I heard you are expecting company today. You must be excited.”

Barbara nodded but decided she wasn’t going to engage in conversation about the visit. The nurse took Barbara’s temperature and blood pressure. “It all looks good,” she reported and then left the room. Barbara sat still trying to decide what to do. It was still too early to go down the hall for lunch and she didn’t feel like walking the halls, so she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She took the quilt off the back of her chair and wrapped it around herself. She couldn’t explain why she was so cold this morning, but the colorful quilt her mother had made when Barbara was a child warmed her heart. She could hear the old Singer sewing machine rat-a-tatting in the dining room on the farm and sitting next to her mother watching her stitch a looping pattern on the quilt. These moments of domesticity on the farm were Barbara’s favorite memories because she and her mother were by themselves. Barbara’s brothers always had chores to do outside or in the barn and Barbara spent hours in the kitchen or sitting next to her mother learning to sew. These were the moments when she felt most safe and loved. She thought about all her mother’s quilts that she had saved and boxed. What would happen to them when she was gone and would they ever cover and protect another child? It was sad to think that they would be



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thrown out or sent to Good Will without a thought. She pulled her quilt tighter around her shoulders. Maybe she would talk to Karen about the quilts when she got here.

The clock chimed and Barbara sighed – time for lunch. She found getting up hard, her body ached more than usual. But she knew if she didn't show up at the dining room the nurses would come and find out why, so she pushed herself onto her feet.

Lunch brought more questions and it seemed that everyone in the dining room knew of the impending visit. Barbara tried to be as gracious as she could, but inside she felt her stomach tighten and her only thought was getting back to her quiet room. She found she wasn't hungry and retreated as quickly as she thought polite, back down the hall.

The colorful quilt in her chair called to her and she happily sat down and wrapped the soft comfort around her shoulders once again. As she settled into the chair the clock chimed and Barbara wondered how much more time would pass before Karen's arrival.

Sitting here brought back memories of the times Barbara had sat in hospitals watching the people she loved lose their fight for life. First her father, after a third stroke he lay in a coma for three days before it was decided that he would never wake up. Her mother was diagnosed with Uterine Cancer in May and Barbara was with her when she lost her battle in July. She could remember sitting with her mother and holding her hands knowing she would never have the opportunity to talk with her again. Tom's brain tumor took Barbara to the hospital again. It was hard to watch Tom drift in and out of recognition and ultimately, he lost the fight as well. Barbara wiped a tear from her cheek from the memory. She wondered if anyone would sit by her side when her time came. Barbara shivered at that thought and sank deeper into her chair.

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The clock chimed at three o'clock as the door opened. Bess stepped into the room with her cart and looked at Barbara in her chair. She looked so small and fragile wrapped in the beautiful, colorful quilt. Bess called softly, "Barbara?"

When there was no movement Bess walked over to the chair and looked at the still body. She knew there was no point in calling Barbara's name or shaking the body. As she turned to call for 911 a young woman appeared in the doorway. "Hi! I'm Barbara's niece, Karen."

Bess shook her head and put her hands on Karen's shoulders. "I'm so sorry," was all she said.