

THIN PLACE

Eleanor entered her faculty office before daylight, dropped her purse into the bottom drawer then dove into her email. During the next few hours, the energy and noise levels gradually picked up as staff flowed in, phones rang, students and faculty came and went.

She rested her thick chin in her manicured hand and blankly stared at her computer monitor for several minutes, then her gaze began drift. Diplomas, plaques, old family photos. Awards for Outstanding This and Outstanding That. Her daughters' high school graduation pictures; Molly's from last year and Megan's the year before that. The family of four, with their arms around each other, smiling in front of the Christmas tree. She grimaced and adjusted her waistband. *I can't believe I thought I was fat when we took that picture.* Her eyes narrowed as she zeroed in on her husband, Duane, and wondered how they had grown so far apart; wondered when they had become strangers under the same roof.

About a month ago, he suddenly became chipper, lost weight, and started working late. She pinched the bridge of her nose then stared into space and felt adrift. The prospect of failure, of loss was as foreign to her as living on the moon.

Her ringing cell phone jolted her back to the present. She checked the screen, MOM, and let the call roll to voice mail. A few minutes later, the department secretary stood in her office door.

"Dr. Watkins, your mother's on the phone. She says it's urgent."

Eleanor frowned. "Transfer the call."

"Ellie, it's your dad," her mother's voice broke. "You need to come."

Her mother had a very short list of permissible emotions. Hope was acceptable but warmth rarely made its way to the surface. Sadness was a clear sign of weakness.

Eleanor tilted her well-coiffed head. “Has he been in an accident?”

“No.” She paused, “it’s cancer.”

“Cancer? What are you talking about?” Her breathing was rapid and shallow.

Silence.

“He didn’t want you to worry.” Her mother continued in a tone Eleanor hardly recognized. “This is bad, Ellie. You need to come home. Now.”

Anger, according to Eleanor’s mother, was generally unladylike but allowable in rare circumstances. And fear? Never. “Trust in the Lord,” her mother always said. But there it was, and Eleanor heard it.

“I’ll be there this afternoon.”

The news hit then ricocheted around the small south Texas town. The wonder wasn’t that Lloyd Watkins had taken to bed in the middle of the day. The wonder was how fast the oversized man had shriveled down to almost nothing. The whole town saw the extra holes whittled into the belt that barely held pants on his hipbones. There was gossip about doctors’ visits with words like stage four, rare, and aggressive; the possibility of a clinical trial which, according to the chatter, he refused outright.

A few hours later, Eleanor drove past the green city limit sign for the first time in over a year: ESCONDIDO SPRINGS POPULATION 2036. She shook her head when she passed the segregated cemeteries—whites buried on the left side of the road and Mexicans on the right. She passed the Bluebonnet Café and half a dozen sad, dusty storefronts, then turned onto Oleander Street.

Her Prius coasted to a stop in front of a modest brick house with white shutters and a trellis by the front door. Her mouth went dry.

The usually well-manicured yard told the saga of recent weeks. The grass was brown and scraggly; the flowerbeds were full of weeds. Hedges, untrimmed and overgrown, looked like something out of a Dr. Seuss book. She took a minute to steel herself.

When the screen door squeaked closed behind her, she found a house that was dimly lit and jarringly still. Casseroles, homemade breads, and desserts filled the periphery of the kitchen, but it was the table in the center of the room that demanded her focus.

The Formica table had been the family hub, the epicenter of her formative years. It's odd how memories take up residence in the body, seep into the DNA, and hide there—until a speckled green square brings them back to life like water to a dry sponge.

She saw her chubby-cheeked, 10-year-old self, seated there between her parents. Her mother's hand, slender and elegant, reached across the table to Ellie's plate and removed a biscuit.

"Ellie, really?" Her mother's voice dripped with disappointment.

Ellie had fought hard to suppress the humiliation, but a hot tear rolled down her freckled, round face.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Ellie. Any little thing and you just fall apart."

Then, in his calm, quiet way, her dad said simply, "Brenda, stop it," and she saw a brief but undeniable look pass between her parents.

Now decades later, Dr. Eleanor J. Watkins' body held that memory firmly in her throat, her chest, her stomach.

“Esperanza’s with him now.” Her mom stood in the kitchen doorway. “Shouldn’t be long, then you can go in.”

Eleanor was struck by her mom’s appearance. Once the town beauty, Brenda Watkins was now gray at the temples; her glasses, crow’s feet, and dark circles framed her piercing blue eyes.

“Who’s Esperanza?”

“The hospice nurse.”

“Hospice? What the hell, Mom?”

Brenda paused a long minute before she spoke. “He didn’t want to talk about it. Didn’t want to be giving everybody a full report every time he went to the post office and the café and the grocery store. Didn’t want people feeling sorry for him. Didn’t want to see the looks on people’s faces.”

“People? I’m not ‘people.’ I’m his fucking daughter.”

“Eleanor! You watch your language in this house.” She hesitated and took a deep breath. “I know. He wanted to tell you himself, he just couldn’t figure out how. And then he ran out of time.”

Eleanor looked away and swallowed hard. “Okay.” She rubbed her forehead. “So, how is he?”

“Tired. In pain. He keeps mumbling something about wildflowers and tall grass. Esperanza’s hooking him up to IV meds now, putting in a catheter, so that should help.”

“Since when do we have hospice in Escondido Springs?”

“Since they hired a local nurse. Their office is in Laredo,” Brenda said.

The back door squeaked open.

“Hey, Dr. Watkins.” Ben leaned over and kissed Eleanor on the cheek.

“Oh please.” She smiled and squeezed his hand. “Good to see you, Ben. Thanks for being here.”

“Your dad’s been my best friend since Mrs. Connally’s kindergarten.” His bloodshot eyes filled. “I wouldn’t be anywhere else right now.”

“He always said you’re the brother he never had,” Eleanor said.

He nodded and wiped his nose. “Well, Ellie-Belly, that would make you the niece I never had and I’m okay with that.”

Esperanza’s rotund body appeared in the doorway. “You can go in if you want.”

The room was quiet, except for the whine from a machine pulsing oxygen through a tube to his nose. The former gentle giant was now just a wisp of a man.

Eleanor gasped at the sight. “Daddy?” No answer. “Daddy?”

She turned to Ben. “This is surreal.” Her lip quivered.

“Here.” Ben placed a chair by the bed.

She slumped into the chair and reached for her dad’s hand.

“I’m glad you’re here, Ellie. You always put him in good spirits.” Ben paused. “He already looks a lot more peaceful than he did.”

“Do the drugs usually kick in that fast?”

“Don’t ask me. I’m a funeral director. By the time people call me, the drugs don’t matter.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m going to step out so you two can be together. I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.”

About an hour later, her mother opened the door and whispered, “Ellie, the preacher’s here. Would you like to talk to him?”

“What for?” Her gaze never left her dad.

“Well, he wants to talk to us.”

She turned and faced her mother. “I’d rather stay here with Dad.”

“Don’t you think the preacher can bring us some comfort, Ellie? At least hear what he has to say.”

Eleanor pursed her lips. “Okay but let’s make it quick.”

The fresh-faced minister was waiting for Brenda and Eleanor in the living room.

“Reverend Thompson, this is my daughter, Eleanor. We call her Ellie.”

She extended her hand to the pasty little man. “I’m Dr. Watkins. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh? A great help at a time like this.”

“Not an MD,” she explained. “Ph.D. in Psychology.”

“I see.” His voice fell. “May we sit?” He motioned toward the couch. “I know this is an important time in the life of a family, so I’ll be quick.”

Eleanor clenched her jaw.

“I just want you to know that Mr. Watkins, your dad,” he nodded toward Eleanor, “and your husband,” he looked at Brenda, “is nearing the end of his life.”

“We’re aware, Reverend,” Eleanor said. “That’s why he’s under hospice care. That’s why the kitchen is full of enough food to feed an army.”

“Eleanor,” Brenda said.

“I apologize, Reverend. I’m a little stressed.”

“It’s a stressful time. I know. Now, Mrs. Watkins, you’ve been very active with both the choir and the prayer circle but, well, your husband was not in the habit of attending church. So I’m wondering if he is right with the Lord.”

Eleanor sat stone-faced; her legs crossed. “He’s fine,” she said. “No need to worry.”

The clock struck seven, a cuckoo popped out and sounded off. An awkward silence fell on the room.

Brenda quietly said, “He’s a rancher, Reverend. He worshiped creation every day.”

“I see,” the Reverend frowned. “Well, then ... can we pray?”

Eleanor bowed her head.

“Dear God, our brother, Lloyd Watkins is nearing the end of his time on this earth. We know you are a loving, forgiving God—” He droned on. And on. And then, “We pray that Lloyd turns from the darkness –”

Eleanor’s head popped up and turned to her mother whose head was still bowed.

Finally, “In Jesus’s name, Amen.”

“Thank God,” fell out of Eleanor’s mouth. “Sorry,” she said to the preacher then turned to her mother. “I’m going to check on Dad.”

About 30 minutes later, she walked into the kitchen, scooped a pile of chicken casserole onto a plate, and placed it in the microwave.

“Eleanor Jean Watkins, are you proud of yourself?”

Eleanor turned and saw Brenda in the doorway, hand on her hip.

“What are you talking about?”

“You were rude to the preacher. You weren’t raised that way.”

Eleanor sighed. “Oh Mother, not now. Please. That guy’s a puffed-up pious jerk and this is no time to be so damn judgmental.”

“He’s the preacher, Ellie. And he was here to comfort us.”

“Well, I’d say he fell woefully short on that one. Is Dad ‘right with the Lord?’ Good grief.”

The microwave dinged.

“Ellie, you shouldn’t talk to anyone like that, but especially not the preacher.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, just stop.” She looked to the ceiling and sighed. *And there it is. Two ways to do things: her way and wrong.* “Okay, I’m sorry I was rude but if Dad was awake and lucid, do you think that would’ve made him feel the least bit better?”

“I don’t know but—”

“Mrs. Watkins,” Esperanza said, “excuse me, but Mr. Watkins is awake. I thought you’d want to know.”

Eleanor took a step toward the door but Brenda raised her hand.

“I’ll go. Eat your supper.”

Eleanor took a few bites, chewed until it was mush, then dumped the rest of it in the trash. Brenda returned to the kitchen, dazed, and silently took a seat across the table from Ellie.

“Mom? What is it?”

Brenda looked blankly around the room. “Ellie, do you remember Hank?”

“That yellow Lab Dad had when I was in high school?”

“Right. Well, your dad thinks that dog’s up in the bed with him.”

Eleanor sat up in her chair. “He’s hallucinating. Esperanza? Where did she go?”

Esperanza appeared in the doorway. “Sorry, Dr. Watkins. I try to stay out of the way as much as possible. What is it?”

“My dad’s hallucinating. Should you change the dosage on his meds?”

“He’s on the lowest dose of everything already, Dr. Watkins.” Esperanza turned to Brenda. “Does he seem to be in pain?”

“No,” Brenda said.

“Is he agitated? Upset in any way?”

“No,” Eleanor interjected. “He’s just enjoying a rather pleasant conversation with a dead dog.”

“I can contact the doctor if you want but, if we increase his dosage, the less lucid he’ll be,” Esperanza paused. “Plus, it’s possible they’re not hallucinations.”

Eleanor frowned. “What else could it be?”

“I see this all the time,” Esperanza said. “He’s in two worlds now, not fully here and not completely there. My priest calls them ‘thin places,’ where the boundary between heaven and earth opens. Whether he’s hallucinating or something more is happening, we don’t know. But we do know that it’s real to him. My experience tells me the best thing to do is to go with it. Don’t try to tell him he’s hallucinating, just pet the dog.”

Eleanor sat at her dad’s bedside and took his hand. “Hey, Dad, I’m glad you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

He smiled and whispered, “Better now that you’re here. How’s my girl?”

She smiled back. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

His eyes drifted from her face to an empty chair in the corner. He smiled and his face filled with warmth.

“Dad, what are you looking at?”

His brown eyes sparkled. “Sofia.”

Ben quietly moved into the room and stood next to Ellie’s chair. “Did I hear that right?”

She nodded. “Who’s Sofia?”

The high school romance had been the worst kept secret in Escondido history. All the old-timers in town remembered how the white boy and the brown girl looked at each other when they thought no one was watching; how Lloyd grieved when his parents broke them up; how he grieved when she left town; and how he grieved again decades later when her soul left this earth.

“Just a girl we went to high school with,” Ben said. “She passed away years ago.” He leaned in close to the bed and whispered, “Sofia’s here?”

“Oh yes, she’s been here for a while now.”

“I see,” Ben said. “What’s she doing?”

“Just waiting,” Lloyd said, eyes closed. “Ben?”

“Yes.”

“Can you open that window for me?”

“Sure.”

Ben stepped across the room and raised the window. A minute later, the yellow curtains billowed, and a soft breeze drifted into the room.

Lloyd smiled and with his eyes still closed, said, “That feels nice. Thanks, buddy.” He paused a beat. “Well, Mark Gutiérrez. Good to see you, son.”

Eleanor turned to Ben and shrugged.

“He’s a high school kid your dad hired to help out at the ranch. We were just talking about him a few days ago so I guess that’s why your dad’s conjuring him up. Good kid. Hard worker. Your dad really likes him.”

“Likes him? Present tense?”

Ben nodded. “Definitely present tense. Healthy as a horse. Star athlete. Honor roll. The kid has a bright future.”

Concern clouded Eleanor’s face. “Dad, do you think you might be hallucinating?”

He chuckled. “No, but I’m not surprised you’d think that.”

She frowned.

His eyes closed, he whispered, “Do you know where my boots are?”

“Yes. They’re by the washing machine.”

“Will you get them for me? I’m going to need them.”

“Good heavens, Dad. What for?”

Ben nodded and returned a few minutes later, boots in hand.

About 1:00 AM, Eleanor wandered into the living room and found her mom lying on the couch.

“Mom?” Ellie whispered. “You awake?”

“Yeah. Trying to get a little rest but I’m not having much luck. How’s he doing?”

“He’s in and out. Hallucinating quite a bit. Mark Gutiérrez is sitting on the bed scratching Hank’s ears.”

Brenda raised her eyebrows and nodded.

About 7:00 AM, Lloyd opened his eyes, looked at Ellie and said, “I should’ve called the vet for that horse,” then fell asleep again.

She gasped.

She was nine years old, and her horse had been sick for weeks. They watched him grow weaker every day until he collapsed and broke his leg. So, Lloyd put his pistol in the horse’s ear and broke his daughter’s heart. They had never spoken of it again. Until now.

She stroked his face and kissed his cheek. “You did what you had to do, Daddy. You can let it go now.” She put her face on the bed’s edge and sobbed.

A couple of hours later, Lloyd woke and, with clear eyes and a strong voice said, “Ellie, Belly, Bo-Belly, help me sit up.”

“Daddy?” She placed an extra pillow behind his back then ran to the door. “Mom!”

Brenda rushed in then abruptly stopped in the middle of the room. “Oh my. Not what I was expecting. Lloyd?” She paused. “You’re sitting up.” She tilted her head. “Talking.”

He chuckled. “And a little hungry. What are the chances a guy could get a scrambled egg around here?”

“Pretty good.” She whispered to Ellie on her way out the door, “I’ll call Esperanza.”

Lloyd Watkins turned to his daughter. “Have to keep your mother busy,” he said then reached for her hand. “Ellie, sit with me for a bit. I need to tell you some things, Sweet Girl.”

She sat on the side of his bed. “What is it, Daddy?”

“I lived too much of my life for other people and by the time I realized what a bad idea that was, well, let’s just say the sooner you figure out how to live an honest life on your terms, the better. Love’s the only thing that makes any difference in this life. Nothing else is worth a hill

of beans. If you want to make your old daddy happy, start by loving yourself; by being honest with yourself.” He paused and coughed.

“You and Duane aren’t fooling anybody, Ellie. Figure out what you need to do then do it. It can be scary but you’re tough. Another thing about love—and if not for you, I don’t think I’d know this—love’s what’ll live on after this old boy’s gone. So, no matter what, Ellie, whether I’m dead or alive, I will never not love you. Feel that breeze? I think it’s probably like that. I’ll always be with you, Ellie. Always.”

She laughed through her tears. “Always? Really, Dad? You’re going to follow me to the bathroom?”

He smiled. “Only if you want me to but I expect I’ll wait outside. Don’t you worry about me. I’m going to be okay. One more thing. Make peace with your mother. She’s a good woman. She’s going to need you and you’re going to need her. My boots by the bed?”

“Yes, Daddy. Right where Ben put them. But what do you think you need your boots for?”

He took a deep breath and fell asleep just as Brenda returned with his scrambled eggs. Esperanza trailed two steps behind.

An hour or so later, he took a breath then paused a few seconds. Another breath. A longer pause. Another breath.

Eleanor pushed a few buttons on her phone. “Ben, come now.”

“On my way.”

Lloyd raised his hand toward the ceiling and laced his fingers into a hand nobody else could see. He smiled a warm, peaceful smile then whispered, “Let’s go home,” and his chest fell still.

Esperanza held a stethoscope to his chest then turned off the oxygen machine.

A quiet calm descended on the room. Time slowed.

Brenda, Ellie, and Ben sat with Lloyd for a while. Held his hand. Stroked his face.

Quietly wept.

Ben called the funeral home. “Eddie? He’s gone . . . Just now. Can you come get the body? . . . No.” He gasped and his head snapped toward Ellie and Brenda. “When? Oh my . . . Sure. Of course. When you can . . . Thanks, Eddie. I’ll tell them.” His face was pale. His gaze floated around the room.

“Tell us what, Ben?” Brenda frowned.

He took a deep breath. “Eddie said he’ll come get the body when he can. We’ll let you know when it’s ready.”

“Okay.” Eleanor’s brow furrowed. “What are you not telling us, Ben?”

“He said it might take a little longer than usual because we’re pretty busy at the funeral home.” He rubbed his forehead and drew a deep breath. “They found Mark Gutiérrez’s body this morning.”

Eleanor’s knees went weak. She heard her mother gasp.

“According to Mark’s mom,” Ben continued, “he left town Thursday about dark. He was going to see his girlfriend in Eagle Pass, but he never showed up. They thought he was there, and the girlfriend thought he stood her up; so, . . . Anyway, looks like his truck went off a bridge and rolled down into a ravine. No seatbelt. A couple of hikers found him just after daybreak.”

Ellie swallowed hard then turned and stared at her dad’s body.

More casseroles filled the kitchen. Duane and the girls drove in from San Antonio. The funeral, since it was the only social event in town, was huge.

Afterward, the house filled with people who came to eat, hug, and offer condolences. Old men and women teetered up the front steps with their walkers and canes. The screen door opened and slammed as little kids ran in and out.

A former high school classmate who she barely knew said with a slight head tilt and elongated voice, “Heeeeyyyy, how ya dooooin’?” Followed by a cool obligatory side-hug.

But Eleanor’s favorite comment came from Shotgun Harris, a massive woman who donned her best clean overalls and said, “Well, ya don’t wanta die with nothin’ wrong with ya. I’m sure gonna miss him.”

Eleanor found Duane in the dining room and whispered, “We need to talk.”

She felt his body stiffen and she swallowed hard.

“I’ll be home in a day or two,” she said.

They locked eyes. He nodded.

She turned toward the living room but stopped at the sight before her—Brenda sat on the couch flanked by Eleanor’s two daughters. They held hands. Molly leaned in and nestled her head on her grandmother’s shoulder. Megan stroked her grandmother’s arm.

Make peace with your mother, he had said. *Make peace.*

The mothers and daughters smiled at each other across the crowded room. For the first time, Eleanor realized that she stood simultaneously in both the past and the future; and her grief faded into a new, bittersweet understanding of her mother. Years of family knots, taut with anxiety and tension, began to loosen and the possibility of a new peace came into focus.