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### In the Rooms

The ends were the best parts. Throughout the meetings, when the leaders introduced the speakers, when the speakers told their stories, when the others shared about a specific topic and how it related to them personally, Eddie listened for something that interested him, something that moved him, words that made him feel less alone. Occasionally he heard them, and when he did, those meetings became very memorable, since he viewed those words as an extra cherry on top of a sundae that already came with one – the end of the meeting. And every meeting had to end. Something Eddie could count on.

And that, Eddie decided on his way to the church for the Life After 10 meeting, was what he would tell the people if he ever chose to share. But he knew he wouldn't. He had been attending the same meeting for almost four years but had never once raised his hand, so he was not going to kid himself that one day he would feel the need to have all eyes on him and all ears tuned to his particular problems. No, he got what he needed from the ends of the

meetings, and that's what he would tell them if he ever told them anything. But he knew he wouldn't.

Eddie couldn't remember what brought him to this meeting, though he might have seen the group of about 20 people in the small room when he was exiting the church, where he liked to relax in the silence. Whatever it was, he came back daily at 6 p.m., rain or shine, took his seat in the back left corner, farthest from the speaker and closest to the door, then listened for an hour. He found the process soothing, unlike almost everything else in the world, except blues music.

Today's speaker was entertaining, and Eddie did his best to listen. But Eddie became distracted within minutes of sitting down, since a beautiful young woman – between 25 and 30, Eddie guessed – came in late, stepped carefully around him, then sat down in the chair to his right. She was tall and blond and had skin that seemed like the skin of a Golden Delicious apple, so taut and bright, and Eddie wanted very much to touch it, but he knew that that was just a stupid thought. He had them occasionally, and he knew to ignore them. But he found it nearly impossible to ignore her, because as she sat down she smiled at him – her deep-blue eyes as friendly and inviting as her shiny white teeth – and her sundress parted in a way that exposed her

right thigh so thoroughly that Eddie felt uncomfortable, and he wanted to take a pinch of her dress between his fingers, then pull it closed some, but he knew this was just another stupid thought. So he reminded himself to switch his attention back and forth between listening to the speaker and looking at her.

But as Eddie was having this thought, he knew he was lying to himself, because a brunette woman of 50, give or take, sat to his left in the chair just on the other side of the entrance. She was still very pretty and must have been a model or maybe just the most beautiful mother in the PTA when she was younger, and she also wore a sundress, this one kind of off-white, with embroidered flowers ringing the neckline and the waist, which Eddie thought was a nice coincidence, because the young woman's yellow dress also had flowers on it over the left breast. So Eddie, as much as he tried, did not truly give the speaker his due, and he felt a flush of shame for this obvious rudeness, but his current circumstance was extremely rare – more than rare, he realized; this had never happened to him before – so he forgave himself his distraction, then looked back at the right thigh of the pretty young woman.

The speaker finished talking, the baskets were passed around, then the leader started calling on the people who

raised their hands. If Eddie were completely honest with himself, he would admit that he didn't comprehend a single point any of the people sharing had made. He heard their voices, of course, but they sounded kind of like a leaf blower down the street, loud enough to hear but not so loud that you couldn't block it out while trying hard to concentrate on something else. But what Eddie kept concentrating on was, "Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up. Finish the sharing already. Please, stop sharing." Eventually their time expired, and the leader began the process of closing the meeting.

After three minutes of silent meditation, during which Eddie could feel his heart race and the pit of his stomach get queasy, the leader said, "Please rise and join hands. Janet will lead us in the Serenity Prayer."

The room came alive as everyone stood, scraping chairs in the process, looking around them for their hand-holding partners. But Eddie knew exactly who his partners would be, and, as if to quiet his mind, the beautiful young blond woman on his right extended her left hand, and Eddie felt a river of warmth run through him as the softness of her hand gently nestled into a hand that was chapped and calloused. The brunette woman to his left then closed the gap between them by stepping towards him, bumping her shoulder into his

accidentally in the process. She looked up at him, then smiled and quietly said, "Sorry." She slipped her right hand into his left, closing the circle.

He had never felt the presence of a higher power, not inside the rooms nor outside of them, but at that moment, as Janet said, "God," and the rest of the group began to recite the Serenity Prayer with her, Eddie believed that a higher power existed.