

Raymond shifted his weight forward on the coffee shop chair and leaned his cheekbone into the heel of his palm. A childhood verse chided him in his mother's voice of over fifty years ago.

*"Raymond, Raymond, if you're able, get your elbows off the table.
This is not a horse's stable, but your mother's dining table."*

It didn't immediately connect to any pictures in his mind but he had heard it enough to know it was real.

An hour ago he had been at his mother's side in the palliative care ward. She had appeared smaller than he liked to think of her—had looked almost like he was seeing her at a distance. She hadn't greeted him, only closed her eyes and said, "Feed the cats, will you?" It wasn't really a question.

"Yes," he answered, but the cats, whoever they were, must have left or died years ago. The only living thing she owned, he suspected, was the small Christmas cactus someone had brought to cheer her up.

He looked at her again, waiting for her eyes to open. They never did. Her jaw dropped and that was that.

Raymond hadn't wanted to be in the room when the nurses and orderly would come to take her away. He stopped at the reception desk to say that he'd be in the coffee shop waiting for his brother and sister-in-law to arrive. They were late and he was thankful to have a few minutes to himself. From where he sat he faced the open entrance of the café. There was a couple sitting tiredly off to one side. A man in a shapeless blue hospital gown and slippers shuffled in pushing an IV pole ahead of him. Raymond heard steps echo sharply down the hallway. "Here they are," he thought, "hurrying needlessly."

Bill and Marijke had been fast asleep at 2:30 am when Raymond's first text message came in. They never saw it until 5:00 when Bill reached for his cell phone as he did every morning right after Marijke turned off the alarm. "Damn," he said, "No time."

Bill, "William" on his realtor business card, and Marijke, were used to demands on their time from potential home buyers. But they usually had early mornings to themselves—breakfast, coffee, catch up on current events. Not today. The text had said, "ASAP."

They hit the drive-through at Starbucks on their way to the hospital.

“Hey Bill. Marijke,” Raymond said. Bill nodded. “Hey,” he replied and paused to look at Raymond, to see if he’d say something else, “Is she gone?”

“Couple of hours ago,” Raymond said. “Should we see her?” Bill asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe later,” Raymond said, then added, “Did she have a cat? She mentioned cats. I haven’t seen any for years. Did you take them?” Mother might have mixed him up with Bill again. Raymond looked at his brother who didn’t seem to be listening and then at Marijke.

“She used to feed the neighborhood cats before she broke her hip,” Marijke said. “That might be it.” It seemed odd that Marijke knew more about his mother’s life than her sons did.

“Maybe you’re right,” Raymond said. “What’s next?”

“I’ll call her lawyer and get him on it,” Bill answered.

Raymond suddenly realized that his brother had been listening. Marijke started to cry. Raymond pulled some napkins from their holder and pressed them hard against his eyes. Bill looked down and away.

Over the next few days life seemed to stop. Nothing more than daily routines and only as long as they didn’t require much effort or attention. Coffee, whatever was in the fridge—dishes sat in the sink. Gradually he began to feel alive again. It was as though he had been wrapped in blankets, hearing distant, mostly muffled voices, glimpsing unfamiliar rooms and spaces when he closed his eyes to sleep.

Marijke had startled him this morning when she called and said to the answering machine that Bill and she were coming over with something from the lawyer and hoped he would be in. She didn’t wait for him to pick up. She’d have known he was at the kitchen table.

They arrived mid-afternoon. No knock at the door. Bill was the older of the two and was the most like their dad. And Dad had not been the knocking sort. Not with Raymond anyway.

Bill and Marijke each carried a bag of groceries which they placed on the kitchen counter.

“Thought you might need some things,” Marijke said. “Nice to see you, Ray.” She took a bag of groceries and made room in the fridge for its contents: milk, BBQ chicken and eggs. She placed the bananas in a wooden bowl.

“Saw the lawyer yesterday,” Bill started. “He has the will but it doesn’t amount to much except for the house,” he paused, “The equity has mostly been sucked out of it. God knows what for. And there’s this...” Bill dropped a large manila envelope in front of Raymond. “I’ve already opened it. There’s an envelope for each of us in there. Marijke says we should open them together because we’re all the family we have now.” He tipped the envelope on its end and let the two smaller envelopes slip out. One each for William and Raymond.

Bill picked his up and tore the corner of the flap destroying most of the envelope in the process and extracted what appeared to be several sheets of neat handwriting. “It’s just a letter,” Bill said. He put it into the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket.

Raymond waited a moment then picked up the other envelope, turned it over and nodded almost imperceptibly. He stood, walked to the shelf between the window and the back door where he had made room for the Christmas cactus instead of leaving it behind. “Not sure about the light,” he thought, and leaned the unopened letter against the earthenware pot.

“Not you, too?” Marijke shook her head. “It’ll be like...” Raymond said, he paused, looking at her, “It’ll be like not hanging up the phone.” Marijke understood—he’d never open it. “I get it,” she said in a softer tone.

Bill looked blankly at his brother. And Raymond smiled a little for the first time in a while.

By six the next morning Raymond was already dressed and brewing coffee. Usually he would head down to Timmy’s Donut Shop for his caffeine fix. “Double trouble,” he’d say, meaning “Double double,” as he always did at Timmy’s. It amused him and often made his favorite server smile. “Too much trouble, you mean,” she’d say and smile. Human contact.

Raymond guessed that some of the guys at the corner table would be wondering how he was doing. They’d know what had happened, of course, but they’d ask just the same.

He poured his first cup and walked out onto the back porch. Still a bit cool out here, he thought as he leaned against the railing, sipping his coffee as his eyes wandered around the yard. He’d have another cup in a while but first he had something he needed to do.

Raymond sat down on the porch steps and slipped his feet into an old pair of shoes. He tied them and flicked the loops with his finger to see how the laces fell, to make sure he had not tied them

backwards and would not work their way loose. Someone had taught him that a long time ago when they had seen his laces come undone.

He stood up and walked across the yard to the back lane and the narrow picket fence, missing a picket here and there and much of its original coat of white paint. Some boys had probably pulled the missing pickets off decades ago and with galvanized garbage can lids for shields spent a Saturday morning sword fighting. The gate was leaning and half open, held there by uncut grass, weeds and neglect.

He stepped out and onto the lane that led between the two rows of houses that backed onto it. Raymond looked at each fence, each set of stairs and window as he passed them by. A block later he turned and headed home satisfied that he had seen at least one cat, maybe two.

Another cup of coffee in hand, Raymond sat on the top step.

On his way out of the kitchen and onto the porch he had stopped to turn the cactus in the morning light, stepped outside placing a saucer of fresh milk by the porch door, and sat down.