

The Meek Shall Inherit...

Someday she would travel, Jackie thought as she looked up from the Florida guidebook and pictured herself on a sunset beach walk along the Gulf of Mexico. She grabbed a scrap of paper and copied the details of the town she had just read about on Anna Maria Island. As usual, she ran out of space on the torn sheet, so she drew an arrow to remind her to look on the back for the phone number of the Seagull's Rest Motel which she might be able to afford some day. Oh, how she would love to go to Florida! Her cousins, who lived in Tampa, always ended their yearly Christmas phone call with, "We'd love you to come to see us." It didn't matter that they had lived there more than thirty years and had extended the invitation as many times. Each time she excitedly assured them she would see them soon. And each time she believed it. Her latest hospice patient, Mr. Crosby, told her he had been staying at his winter home on Anna Maria Island, south of Tampa, before he got sick. So that got her curiosity going about yet another place to see.

It was hard to picture Mr. Crosby at the beach. He didn't seem like the outdoor type at all. He was very cold and formal. He had come back to his house on Long Island, he said, so he could "make some final arrangements." He was awfully matter of fact about it, like someone completing a business deal. In her job, Jackie met all kinds. This man was so demanding and grouchy he had gone through three aides already, but Jackie prided herself on not judging people. "You never know what they've been through," she always said. So, despite his disgruntled snarl, she had worked with Mr. Crosby three months.

She closed the guidebook and put the piece of paper in the old wicker picnic basket that bulged with so many similar snippets and travel articles that the spring on the lid had long ago snapped and a weight was needed to keep the top closed. Like weeds in pavement, corners of newsprint pushed their way through the sides. She placed the book by the door to remind her to return it to the library on her

way home from work. Then she flipped on the hot water switch so she would have just enough for her shower. While it warmed up, she chose her clothes for the day from the few things that hung next to the furnace in the closet.

She wouldn't need to wear her uniform today. It was the day the hospice aides would stay in the office to learn how to use computers to record their case notes. She shuddered at the idea of computers. The only one she had ever used was the library's catalog. Oh, why did things have to change? Why couldn't she just go on writing her usual report on that simple paper form. She knew how to do that well. But would she be able to learn computers? It was to calm her nerves that morning that she had picked up the guidebook with her breakfast.

She had been a nurse's aide for almost thirty years. She had started at the hospital, with babies, once her own little Cathy died and her husband Bobby, tired of her tears and her need to talk about their precious child, left her for a woman “who wanted some fun for a change.” Her work had given back some meaning to her life. Ten years ago, she was asked to work for hospice, for dying patients who wanted to stay at home. She found that rewarding too...giving them a soothing bath and fresh bed to lie in and making their favorite food. She liked to give them special treats too, like manicuring ladies' nails or a nice hair cut and hot towel shave for the men. That always perked them up. She feared that all this computer stuff would make it too mechanical, taking away that personal touch that gave her so much satisfaction.

By the time she got to the library that night, though, she actually felt better about it. The computer turned out to be fun, like a toy really. And because Jackie's first job out of high school had been as a typist, she already knew the keyboard, so she was faster than the aides who had to hunt and peck. Now, when she saw people at the library sitting in front of the computers, she felt included in their culture, no longer separate from those who at the end of the TV news “can find out more about this topic on www.blahblahblah.com.” In fact, when she checked out another book on the Gulf States, she asked the librarian if she could ever use one of the computers. The nice young woman answered

yes and told her how to get started. That Sunday, her only day off each week, Jackie found herself sitting in front of one of the screens, having to decide between the two email addresses she had thought about giving herself, *Globetrekker* or *Gratitude*. Since each day her patients reminded her of how lucky she was to be healthy, she chose *Gratitude@worldmail.com*.

Four weeks later, when she made her nightly stop to see if any of the people who knew her address had written her, she found an email from a screen name she had never seen before. She opened it and skimmed the contents of a letter from a lawyer. What she read made her eyes bulge and her heart beat so furiously, she had to take deep breaths to try to slow it. She skimmed to the last line and the words “keep this confidential.” She nervously checked to see that the neighboring computer users' eyes were focused on their own screens and then she hit “print” while her mind raced with internal conversation.

I always knew someday there would be a miracle...after all I've tried to be kind and helpful to people...not just my patients, like...what about when Terry needed money for her kids...yeah, there have been lots of times like that...anyone who needed it...I didn't do it for reward, no, but I kind of had the feeling I would be rewarded someday....and here it is. Her shaking hands folded the hard copy of the letter and shut down the computer. She started talking to herself again to keep calm as she walked home, checking every ten steps or so to be sure the folded piece of paper was still in her pocket. She thought of other times she had been generous. Some people had even said she was a fool, and yes, she had been taken advantage of, like when that homeless man said he needed bus fare to Albany, but she would rather that, she concluded, than to end up bitter and mistrustful like some of the old ladies she had taken care of.

Once inside her apartment, she reopened the letter while her coat was still buttoned around her. At the library, she had only glimpsed the amount. She was tempted to skip right to it, but instead, she read from the beginning.

Dear Madam,

I have had the great honor of being legal counsel to a fine and generous man whom I may only refer to as “the Colonel” because it was his wish to remain anonymous in the transaction about which I inform you below. The Colonel had no living relatives except a son to whom he had arranged to leave his considerable fortune. Sadly, while the young man sailed with him off the Nigerian coast, an unexpected gale capsized their yacht and both of them drowned in the sea.

The Colonel's will provided that in the event of such tragedy, I was to locate a kind, unselfish individual to become the beneficiary of the Colonel's hard work and good investment. It has come to my attention that you are such a rare and noble person. You are therefore my choice to receive the amount of \$1,400,000 USD, the current value of the Colonel's assets, after expected taxes.

Local law does not permit that we use any of this money to pay the fees incurred by liquidating the assets. Therefore, I must ask that you provide us with \$6,000 that my firm may use to make the necessary arrangements to transfer this money to you. This will cover the fees of accountants, tax attorneys, real estate agents, etc., all of whom are necessary for a smooth transition which will insure that you will have no complications or tax burden when you receive the money. I am exceedingly sorry to have to bother you with this one minor detail, but as you can see, the small investment now will be repaid a thousand-fold.

Please call me at 234-08-42-36-7744 so that we can begin procedures to get the money to you as soon as possible. It is also of utmost importance that you KEEP THIS CONFIDENTIAL until the transaction is completed.

Humbly Yours,

Ernest Leech

Legal Representative

Jackie read and reread...and reread...the amount. She poured herself some water. She tried to regain the feeling that had left her fingers and toes. She looked around her apartment to see if she was indeed who she was.

While she finally took off and hung up her coat, she thought about that \$6,000 the lawyer needed. She did not question the validity of the need, just where she would get that kind of money. She did have an IRA with almost that much in it, but she couldn't take that out until she turned 60 next year. Or could she? She would ask the bank. Otherwise, she would have to take a loan.

She wondered what time it was in Nigeria, but before she tried to figure it out, she dialed Mr. Leech's number. She apologized to the nice gentleman who answered the phone, in case she had awakened him.

“Oh no,” he answered. She hadn't and he was “so glad” to hear from her. He told her what to do to get the money to him.

She was awake all night but not the least bit tired the next day. On her lunch hour, she talked to the woman at the bank who advised her to take a loan instead of her retirement savings. So that's what Jackie did, telling herself she would repay it the instant the million-plus dollars was in her hands so that she would save on the 8 ½% interest. She had told the bank lady that she needed the money for some urgent expenses. Jackie never lied, but since Mr. Leech had said it was *legally* necessary to keep the inheritance secret for now, she felt it was okay. Besides, the bank still had her retirement savings as collateral, so they didn't seem to mind lending her the money. In fact, once she mentioned she was expecting an inheritance from her uncle, the loan officer became a lot more courteous, offering all sorts of services to Jackie. She felt flattered and blushed. Suddenly she realized that besides money, the windfall would give her something else she had never had, power. Oh, she wouldn't abuse it, she assured herself and God, but as she walked back to work, her posture straightened and her gait became slower and more confident. By the end of the following week, the money was on its way to the Colonel's lawyer.

* * *

Mr. Leech had said he would keep her aware of the progress of his work, but two weeks went by and there was no word - no emails, no phone calls, no letters. By the third week, Jackie sent an email asking only if the money had arrived okay. Each night, she eagerly checked her mail at the library but found nothing but junkie advertisements. So finally, she called.

She was sure there was a mistake. She redialed because the number could not have been

disconnected. She dialed a third time. It was. Her heart pounded violently. She grabbed the letter, reread it, threw it down, stomped her feet and screamed, “Fool, fool, you stupid, stupid fool!”

On the days that followed, Jackie was disconsolate. Feelings she had always been able to push away overwhelmed her...anger, fear, self-loathing, even hatred, the one she tried the hardest to deny. She moped up the path to her patient's home each morning. The usual bounce in her step, her eagerness to bring cheer to a lonely, dying man had left her. She would never be able to retire now. She imagined trying to turn and bathe patients ten, fifteen years from now. Her back already ached from it. How could she go on? What was worse, she no longer wanted to. It took all that was left of her strength to make Mr. Crosby's bed, to tend his blistering, edematous feet. It took patience she did not have to let him slowly wash his privates, so he could keep his dignity as much as possible, while she stood out of sight, scowling and staring blankly into space, one disinterested ear habitually attuned to his breathing to make sure he did not exert himself. When he was done, she muttered automatic words of praise and encouragement and found relief in tucking him beneath the covers so she could brood in peace while washing his dishes. After a week of this zombie-like performance, Mr. Crosby looked up at her as she handed him a freshly laundered towel.

“What's ___ wrong, ___ Jackie,” he gasped out between breaths of oxygen. He had a demanding tone even then and he startled her.

“What do you mean, Mr. Crosby?” She forced a smile. “Nothing's wrong.”

“Don't ___ tell ___ me. I know you ___ too ___ well.”

She was silent. Then the sobs broke through. The tears followed and despite all her training, which teaches aides not to burden their patients with their own troubles, she sunk into the chair next to his bed and blubbered out her story. When she finished, she kept shaking her head, trying to stop the heaving of her shoulders while she uselessly wiped her eyes. She glanced up at him, then folded over into her lap in another round of weeping when she saw the soft, kind look in his misty eyes, one she had never seen there before.

“Now ___ now,” he muttered soothingly. “Now, now,” was all he said.

“Oh, I'm ___ so ___ sorry.” Now it was she who gasped between words. “I should never have burdened you like this. I am so sorry.” She rose and pulled herself together.

He kept staring at her face. She did not return his gaze but bustled about the room, wishing the floor would gobble her up. Now she had lost the one thing that had been left to her, pride in her work. Thankfully, within minutes, whether he faked it or not, when she side-glanced over, she saw his eyes closed in sleep.

Mr. Crosby slept the rest of the day. Before Jackie left that night for her Sunday off, she slipped a note into the book he had been reading. “I'll see you Monday, Mr. Crosby.” And she added, in smaller letters, “Thank you.”

She was exhausted and slept half of Sunday. Monday morning, she shut the ringing alarm and dozed again, something she never did on a workday. Then she heard another ring. It took awhile for her to realize it was the phone.

“Hello,” she answered groggily.

“Jackie! Oh, I'm glad I caught you before you left.”

Jackie sat up, suddenly wide awake. It was her supervisor.

“Listen, there's a change in your schedule. Mr. Crosby died last night. Instead, you go to...”

“Wait, Miss Mackie, wait! Please! Did you say Mr. Crosby died?”

“Yes, Jackie.....,” Louise Mackie paused when she heard the sniffles through the phone. “Oh, I'm sorry, Jackie, I didn't realize you had grown close to him. He was such a” She hesitated. It was wrong to speak ill of the dead. “Listen, dear, why don't you just take the day off. It sounds like you could use a rest anyway.”

“Yes, thank you, Miss Mackie.....but,” she collected herself, “do you know if there are any funeral arrangements?”

“No, dear, he was alone you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

* * *

That Friday, as she dragged herself to the bus stop, her postman spotted her as he passed in his van. “Jackie!” he yelled. They were on first name basis. He had been her mailman for years. She saw him stop and get out. *Oh no!* She was in no mood for socializing.

“Hey, Jack, I've been trying to catch you. There's a registered letter for you. I didn't want to bring it back to the post office. I know it's hard for you to get there.”

Oh God! What now? He handed her the envelope and a pen to sign the receipt. She could see the return address, Willard Collins, Esq. Her hand trembled as she wrote some semblance of her name. She was certain she was in trouble.

“Hey, you okay Jackie?”

“I gotta go, Ralph. I'm sorry. Thanks.” Even her voice shook. She turned back toward her home as he again expressed concern. Stooped and rushing, she waved back without looking,

“I'm fine. Thanks.” She kept walking as if machinery moved her legs.

Once she managed to get the key in the door, she sat down and opened the letter. “Oh!” she was relieved and nearly laughed from the audacity of these people. Another “inheritance” letter. “They must think they've found a real sucker here,” she said out loud. She shook her head. But then she saw the familiar name. And yes, it was true he had no family. As she continued reading, her eyes misted over and the rest of the page became nearly illegible.

“On the day before he died, Mr. Richard Crosby summoned me to his bedside. He was of sound mind and judgment and instructed me as follows.

Because of your excellent, attentive, and reliable care in his final days, Mr. Crosby has legally bequeathed to you all of his estate, which, after the sale of his Long Island home and legal expenses, will amount to a sum in excess of \$350,000 as well as a cottage he owned on Anna Maria Island, Florida, which, he has instructed, should be kept and deeded to you. The

cash proceeds from the Long Island house and other investments should more than cover the upkeep of the Florida home. He suggests you seek good investment counseling to increase the value of his gift. Mr. Crosby, along with this financial bequest, has asked me to convey his deepest gratitude and good wishes for your health and happiness and the assurance that the transfer of these assets will be executed at absolutely no cost to you.”