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The Front

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It was not an ordinary morning. The sun had tapped its rosy fingers on the horizon and now tormented two gaunt steers searching for grass just north of town. Clouds of dust rolled across the arid land and, acting more like dry fog, filled the cracked, pitted road in front of the bus station. The bus closed its doors and groaned to a start. As it left the station, headed west, its exhaust whipped the strange fog into a whirling cloud that finally swallowed the grey chariot.

"Don't stop here much," drawled the red-complexioned man standing in the doorway as he nodded toward the disappearing bus.

The single passenger, a woman, squinted in the dust, her dress dancing in the wind. Her brilliant eyes bathed the tendrils of auburn hair blowing in her face as she clutched a lacquered, green box.

"Sorry 'bout the dust. It ain't rained much this year."

Turning, the woman swung her long hair behind her shoulder and started down the road toward town.

"Ain't much of a talker," mumbled the old man as he went back inside. "But she has nice ankles." The hinges creaked as he closed the door against the dust and the harsh whispers of the woman's heels on the parched earth.

Fred Summers slammed the door to his truck and walked around to put a quarter in the parking meter.

"Morning, Fred."

He turned and smiled at the two women approaching him. Thick ankles and generous waistlines testified to their frequent early morning trips to Sibyl's Bake Shop. In fact, until today, this ceremony signaled the Monday through Saturday daily routine.

"Well, bless my soul, if it's not Mabel and Selma. You feelin' better, Mabel? Missed you at church last night." Sam Thompson had appeared at the door of Thompson General Store, as usual, to greet the women.

"Oh, go on. Did you really miss me? Why I just had a stomach virus or some such thing, but I feel better today . . . I really do."

"How's Demma Lou?" Selma asked, her fat cheeks rolling as she spoke.

"Oh, she's fine, fine. She's been puttin' up some tomatoes, though we barely had enough to pick this year. I don't know as I've ever seen it so dry. Don't know what we're gonna do. No, Sir. It's bad, real bad."

"Don't you know it. Why I hear Herb lost his farm, too. It's terrible, just terrible. But the good Lord has his reasons . . . it's just . . . Oh, enough of that. We're on our way to see Demma Lou right now. Haven't been there in a month of Sundays. We're gonna take her some nice cinnamon rolls . . . You take care of yourself, now, Sam. You, too, Fred. Tell your momma and daddy we said hello."

"Sam is such a dear; I bet he hasn't missed church a day in his life. It's too bad about their boys. I hear they haven't been back since they went away to that college down in South Texas. They say Demma Lou's been taking it real bad. Just wasting away to nothing. Won't eat anything sweet, and Ellie says she don't even bathe half the time. Well, you've seen her yard. Looks like she hasn't watered it in weeks. I don't know what to do for that poor old thing. She was so close to those boys. Lord knows why. Caused her nothing but trouble, what with their constant bicker-

ing and trouble making. Too bad she never had a daughter—once a daughter always a daughter, I always say." Selma and Mabel shared the lines as they repeated the conversation they practiced each morning. Only the characters changed. At Sibyl's they turned and climbed the steps to the front porch. The dried wheat wreath with the bells on it announced their arrival.

Reaching the edge of town, the woman from the bus turned up Hyacinth Street. Before her, as if on a canvas stretched to fit an arid frame, cottonwoods shaded the hot pavement lined with wrought iron mailboxes. Anemones filled planters bulging from frequent watering on the porches of white frame houses, their variously colored shutters stippling the scene with rectangles of color. The warm south wind blew steadily over the struggling grass, wafting a minty smell as sprinklers clicked across the

The Front

by Peggy Brown

Oh to
fly
dip
soar
in capricious winds
play games by cliffs
or glide through
uncobbled
space
to drop fearless
flap and rise
cross drafts and ride
wind
waves
to mountain shores
over watchers below
who say
"how free"
as the swallows and I
dive
glide
soar
and make no judgment

wilting lawns. She walked slowly and deliberately past Rose Street, Crocus Street, Violet Street—Sibyl's Bake Shop.

Selma and Mabel opened the door just as the woman walked by. Startled, they drew back long enough for her to walk past then leaned awkwardly out the door, balanced so that they looked from the street as if they were a two-headed woman.

Sam glanced up from his fertilizer. He had been repackaging it, boxing it for his shelves. The transfigured faces of the two women as they passed outside his window sent him hurrying out to see what was going on.

Jeffery Dale and Jerry Bob had just come out of the drugstore across the street, Jeffery Dale's lathered face half-shaved. The barber's cape drooping from his shoulders, caught in the wind and made him ghost like against the cinnamon red door.

"Who's that?" they all seemed to say at once.

The first light of morning had pushed through the shutters, its rosy fingers tapping the eye lids of one of the sleeping figures. Demma Lou blinked against the glare and rolled to a sitting position, her feet barely touching the floor. Sam snored smoothly, his back turned to the sun.

Reaching for her robe on the bed post, she slipped it on and shuffled into the kitchen. She went to the cabinet for the catfood, opened a new can of Puss 'N Boots, then took both the can and a sack of dry food to the group meowing and dancing outside the screen door. She stood and watched, holding the empty can like a torch, as the four cats fought for position.

Back in the kitchen, she took the can of Folgers off the second shelf of the cupboard and made coffee. As it perked she turned on the small radio she kept on the window sill in the kitchen.

". . . and the low for this evening will be 85. But here's the good news, folks. We can look forward to a little relief from the heat—no rain in sight, but there is a front moving in from the Rockies . . ." She stopped, listening. Appropriate, she thought, why do I only hear the "lows?" Somewhere there must be "highs."

She took the daisy mug off the mug tree Jason had given her for Christmas. Hesitating, she held the cup in her hands. Her thoughts raced to other mornings when Jason had burst into the kitchen, shirt unbuttoned, books in hand. "I'm late mom, don't have time to eat." He'd grab the toast out of her hand and race for the door, the third honk blending with the slam of the door. Kevin would have been gone for thirty minutes. He was the one who liked order. Yet he never thought to bring her the crumpled bluebonnets as Jason would when he came home, exhausted, from his adventures along the drainage ditch at the north end of their property. He was always on some quest for gold, lost sheep, or some such nonsense. She filled the cup and took her coffee to the back porch swing.

The day would be a hot one. Already the wind felt warm against her face. There was an unusual light in the sky, a brightness she felt rather than saw. As she stared out toward the field, the carpet grass seemed to take on new shades of brown, seemed to suck at the dew that dried as its blades turned to the sun, mimicking the sun flowers at the edge of the lawn that strained to follow the sun even as their leaves wilted. She could almost hear the crunch as the boys, locked in a half-Nelson or some such hold, she could never remember, fell to the carpet of green grass and

wrestled until skinned and grass stained they limped in for bandaids and Kool Aid. Even later, in high school, they had parked their cars out back to fix a muffler, build a new engine, or change a tire. She could still see the ruts, even though Sam had filled them in last fall after Jason left for school. Her gaze dropped to the daisy cup on her lap. She had forgotten to drink her coffee.

"You're up early," Sam called, pushing open the screen door. "Get me some coffee, will you?"

Demma Lou hurried in, took Sam's cup from the shelf. It was a brown, thick ovenware piece they had had since they were first married—could it have been thirty years?

Sam came in from the garden cradling six ripe tomatoes and some late squash in his khaki shirt. Under his arm was *The Valley Morning Star*.

She stared at the back page of Sam's paper over bacon and eggs till the lines began to blur, and the boys were sitting at the table.

Jason wore a striped T-shirt; the lines slanted where the shirt had hung at an angle on the clothes line. His brown hair curled into a soft lamb's wool rug flattened over his left ear. His sunburned cheeks puffed out as he grinned at her across the table. That grin always preceded a mischief written in his eyes, and she knew he would be late to dinner that evening. Kevin wore an ironed, plaid, cotton shirt, and she knew it would be neatly tucked in his stretch-ironed jeans. Then Jason spilled his milk, and she leaped up to get a towel. He was so rambunctious. But so full of life. As she reached for the towel she felt a little foolish.

She cleared off the table and started the canning pot on the gas stove. Absentmindedly she washed the dishes as the water came to a boil, and she dipped the tomatoes in the boiling water. Was that to be her life? Since the boys left, it seemed her life was a patchwork of cleaning, canning, and Sunday night socials.

"What's the matter, Demma Lou?" Sam was standing over her now. "You don't seem yourself. Is something wrong?"

"No, Sam." Her voice sounded dead, even to her. "I'm just tired."

"You might be coming down with the flu. I hear it's going around. Better take care of yourself." He kissed her lightly on the cheek and left for the store.

She watched as he went out the back door. His hair had greyed, looked dry. He was getting old, so she must be, too.

Making her way to the bedroom she stared at herself in the mirror, then twisted her hair into a tight knot on the back of her head. She picked up the tube of lipstick (she had forgotten the name of it, the label fell off long ago), then dropped it on the oak dresser. She saw an old woman staring back at her from the mirror, old eyes languishing on its surface. Then she was young and her eyes danced at the sight of Jason in the nurse's arms. His dark hair matted, he seemed to smile up at her. His smile warmed her, made her forget that she'd wanted a girl. She'd always wanted a girl. Would a daughter have left her, too?

She pushed herself away from the dresser and slipped into her work dress. Mabel and Selma would be there in a few minutes, and she needed to straighten up.

She picked up the socks Sam had left by the bed and dropped them in the hamper. The lid slipped from her hand and slammed shut. She jumped at the noise. In fact, she felt weak. Why should she feel weak? It seemed she felt compressed, almost as if her skin might collapse any second. She wiped her forehead with the back

of her hand and went to get a dust cloth. She straightened the chintz curtains she had made when Jason was a sophomore. Jason. Why could she not get her mind off those boys this morning? Actually, she seemed to think of them often. Why didn't they ever come home to see her?

She hurried to dust her oak dresser, fingering the ring left by the juice glass Jason had set on the dresser when he was twelve. He had given her the cracked atomizer he bought at a garage sale to make up. She stroked the memory and left the room.

She walked to the front door: the grass was dying, yet she couldn't bring herself to set up the sprinkler. Her geraniums looked wilted, but she couldn't bring herself to get the water can. She felt distant, unattached to the ritual she had gone through morning after morning.

In the side lawn pitcher mounds and wiener-roast pits had leveled to a quilt of sienna. Now the place seemed lifeless and boring, and she could scarcely breathe in the weight of the air. She turned to go in just before the first crunch of heels on the driveway.

She opened the door at the first knock. It wasn't Mable or Selma but a stranger.

"Yes," she responded, calm in spite of her surprise. The woman from the bus stepped inside.

"So this is it," she said.

"So this is what?" Demma Lou replied.

"I wondered what it would be like. It's different from the pictures."

"What pictures?" The incredibility of the situation challenged Demma Lou.

The woman didn't answer but placed the box on the rosewood table by the sofa. There were no rings on that one; Jason always sat at the other end when he watched TV.

"I think I'll have some tea," the stranger said, heading toward the kitchen.

Demma Lou suddenly grew furious.

"I don't believe I offered you any," she snapped. "Who are you?"

"Do you have any herbal tea? I have this new craving for Red Zinger. Can't get it where I'm from . . . Go ahead. I'll wait out here in the swing."

"First of all I don't have any Red Zinger tea. Second, I don't want you to have tea with me. I . . . you don't even have a cup." Demma Lou very seldom got angry, and the words didn't flow for her.

"Yes I do. It's the one with the pomegranate on it."

"I don't have one with a pomegranate on it. I think you'd better get out of my house."

"Look on the mug tree that Jason gave you last Christmas."

Demma Lou was taken back by the woman's uncanny familiarity with her business, but couldn't resist looking on the mug tree. She knew the cup wouldn't be there—but it was. It was fiery orange with a hot cinnamon-colored pomegranate on the side. She felt a bit weak and leaned on the counter. How did this stranger know Jason and how did that cup get in her kitchen?

"I think the tea is in the cupboard on the left," the visitor directed.

Obediently Demma Lou walked over to the cupboard, opened it, and took out the Red Zinger tea.

It only took a few minutes for the tea kettle to boil. Demma Lou said nothing to the woman but busied herself finding lemon, sugar, a cinnamon cookie she had in the freezer, and a straw. She didn't know why she got the straw, but it seemed important at the time. When the tea kettle whistled she poured the boiling water over the tea bag. The rising steam smelled nice.

She took the small tray to the swing and waited. The woman smiled and took the tea and cookie.

"Thank you. You are kind. Won't you have a seat?"

Demma Lou sat lightly on the other end of the chair swing and folded her hands.

"You don't have to be so proper," the woman said. "Relax."

Demma Lou said nothing but watched the woman drink the hot tea. Demma Lou felt herself swallowing as she watched the beautiful young woman gulp down the boiling hot tea.

"Lonely?" asked the woman suddenly.

Startled, Demma Lou bristled. This woman had a disturbing manner.

"No."

"That's not what I hear," answered the visitor.

"Guess you can't trust your ears," Demma Lou replied, surprised at the sarcasm in her voice.

"Oh, I can trust my ears. I hold them to the ground and hear the pulse of the world."

Demma Lou looked blankly at the woman.

The young woman turned away and looked out toward the field behind the house.

"Your yard looks a bit dry—ever think of watering it?"

"What business is it of yours, I'd like to know," Demma Lou demanded. She deeply resented this woman.

"I saw a bumper sticker the other day that read, 'Live simply that others may simply live,'" the woman offered.

"What has that got to do with my yard?" Demma Lou wanted to know.

Without answering, the young woman got up.

"I want to see the drainage ditch," she announced.

"What drainage ditch?" Demma Lou was confused.

"Do you have any shoes I could borrow. I just brought these heels."

Most likely out of bewilderment at the audacity of the woman, Demma Lou went inside and came back with an old pair of Sassos. She had a newer pair, and she felt some satisfaction in knowing that she had given the worst of the two pair to this smart aleck.

"C'mon, let's go."

"What do you mean 'Let's'?"

The woman took Demma Lou's unwilling hand and pulled her out toward the field.

"This is crazy," she protested, but she followed, stumbling over clods of dirt in the plowed field beyond the yard. Black dirt filled her shoes and felt sticky against her sweaty feet. Dried grass stuck her ankles, made shallow scratches below the hemline of her dress. The wind pulled at the bun she wore, dragged strands of hair into her face. She stopped and pulled off her shoes. The earth felt good to her feet, tender as they were. She quickly found she could avoid stepping on clods by digging her toes into the upper areas of the rows. It soothed her feet when the dirt fell away from her foot—it was cool beneath the hot surface. When they reached the

other end of the field, she stopped, brushed off her feet and put her shoes back on. The woman did the same.

"What's over here?" the stranger wanted to know.

"I don't know any more—haven't been up here for years."

"Let's see."

They climbed over the mound of dirt formed from repeated dredging efforts to keep the drainage ditch functioning. Demma Lou's dress caught on the dead Johnson grass that lay stifling in the drought.

On the other side was a narrow path, grown over with weeds and branches from a volunteer mesquite. The woman stepped over the obstacles and made her way up the path. Demma Lou followed, no longer resisting.

Further on the woman stopped. A few feet below in the clay bank was a small ledge. Turning to look at Demma Lou, she nodded to it and jumped down. Demma Lou followed. There, cut in the bank, was a small cave. The woman knelt down and crawled inside. Here Demma Lou balked.

"It's O.K. C'mon in. It's cool in here."

"I'll get my dress dirty," Demma Lou complained.

"Does it matter?" the woman asked, and Demma Lou crawled in.

It wasn't a deep cave. Likely the boys had dug it when they played up here. The air inside was earth damp and old. It felt heavy on Demma Lou's skin, and she closed her eyes for just a minute. Forgetting about the woman sitting quietly beside her, Demma Lou felt the space of the cave, its thick air bathing her sundried skin. She felt the damp cool enter her, flooding her. She expanded until her skin gave way and she burst free—feeling the fertile air. There she could fly, become like the sparrows that played in the wind. A gust gathered her wings, and she glided up, caught in the thin air of the clouds. Below, the parched earth became a picture dabbled with browns and greens and an occasional red. A bird of reason, she turned and dove, glorying in the sensation of wind whipping the tendrils of hair into her mouth. She breathed deeply, and her lungs felt moist. She hadn't realized they were dry. Her bones became less brittle, as the wind bathed them in cool cloths dipped in the pool of air. Her eye lids, now cool, stopped fluttering against the imposed dark. Her wings supported her in the swirl, and the red patches grew to clumps of raspberries. She became aware of the woman beside her, but still had wings, and Demma Lou opened her eyes. The light from the entrance to the shallow cave seemed overly bright.

"We'd better go," the woman said.

Demma Lou slowly drifted back to the space of the cave, reached back to test her wings, then resigned herself to the present.

They climbed out of the cave and made their way back up the bank. It was slippery, but Demma Lou caught hold of a branch protruding from the bank and pulled herself up. They made their way back toward the house. The sun had gone behind a cloud, and the air felt thicker, almost moist to Demma Lou. She walked easily now, familiar with the earth giving way beneath her feet. As they neared the house she noticed the sun flowers had straightened to follow the course of the sun as it made its way higher in the sky.

The two women left their shoes by the back door and, barefooted, went inside. Demma Lou went to the sink and got two

glasses of water.

"It's time for me to go," the woman said, and she put on her shoes and left. She was out the door before Demma Lou had a chance to ask her any of her questions.

Turning from the door, Demma Lou saw the box. In two steps she had it in her hands and was out the door calling to the disappearing figure.

"You've forgotten your box," she yelled into the wind.

"Keep it," the woman called back as she turned the corner.

Back inside, Demma Lou dropped into the rocker by the door. She held the lacquered box in her hands for a few moments. Then she opened it. Inside was a single narcissus. She closed the box and set it on her lap.

She hadn't been sitting there long when there was a knock at the door. She jumped up and rushed to the bedroom, where she quickly stashed the box in her lingerie drawer. The knock came again, louder this time.

She opened the door, and Mable and Selma stood there with a box from Sibyl's Bake Shop in their hands. Demma Lou stood there, barefooted, her hair falling in her face, her dress torn and dirty.

"Good morning," Demma Lou beamed. "Wish I could ask you in, but I've got some things I need to do. Thanks for the cinnamon rolls," she said, as she took the box out of their hands and shut the door. She thought she heard thunder in the distance as she held the box to her breast, whirled around once, and took a ballerina's pose as she waltzed her bare feet into the kitchen.