

Edna and Luna

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In the meat section of Bayless market, Edna Harwood picked up a shrink-wrapped New York steak and felt a cramp in her uterus. She wasn't sure exactly where her uterus was. The pain could have been coming from the bottom of her stomach or her intestines, but the aching reminded her of how it had felt years ago when she'd had a miscarriage. The doctor assured her it wasn't her fault and she should try again. "Nature knows best," he'd said. "It might have been deformed."

Edna leaned a hip against the counter, felt the frosty coolness through the thin cotton fabric of her slacks. She took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. She'd read an article in *Reader's Digest* about how to breathe to relieve anxiety and pain. It seemed to work. She examined the steak, frowned at the weight and price and then remembered that Hank was the one who'd loved a good piece of meat, and he was dead. He'd been gone almost a year, but sometimes Edna forgot. She'd look at Valentine and anniversary cards or drop Old Spice deodorant in her grocery cart without thinking.

Edna laid the steak back on top of the neatly stacked slabs. She shivered and buttoned up her cardigan, fingering the Christmas tree pin embedded with tiny emeralds and rubies, a birthday gift from Hank that anchored over her heart. The temperature outside was a hundred and ten degrees in Phoenix, but the air conditioning in the market was so cold that on her weekly outing, when she drove her Cadillac four blocks to Bayless, she had to remember to take a sweater.

Edna opened her handbag and checked her wallet.

She'd had at least fifty pocketbooks back in Chicago, with hats to match. Hats that she cocked to one side of her head. Hats with veils and feathers and little gold chains that hung slightly over her eye. But that was when Hank was alive and there were places to go that required a hat.

He was the one who'd wanted to retire in the heat, but he died a few months after they moved into their newly built house. Before Edna had time to think, she'd blurted out to his corpse lying in St. Joe's hospital, "How could you do this to me?" She was alone in a new city and had no idea how to handle money.

At first, Edna couldn't stand to be alone in the house. She set up a daybed on the enclosed porch and fell asleep at night listening to crickets

and lonely dogs. In the mornings, she'd settle herself in a chair with a cup of spiked coffee, her legs up on an ottoman, and read the paper. She taught herself to imitate the cooing of mourning doves. Groups of them pecked around near the bird of paradise bush in the backyard. Edna spent time floating on her back in the swimming pool, at all hours, feeling the water gently lap her ears.

It still didn't seem like Hank was completely dead, just off on an extended trip bird hunting or fishing at Saguaro Lake. The first thing Hank bought

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after they moved to Phoenix was a boat. He named it *Second Chance* and had a backyard shed for it built with a huge door so he could roll it out into the alley and hook it up to his car. Edna liked how he'd looked, dapper, sporty, and slim in his all-white boating outfit.

But sometimes she felt glad to be alone, especially when she remembered that the days of worrying about Hank's mood were over.

At the dinner table he'd suddenly shout out things like, "For God's sake, Edna, where are the rolls?" She thought his outbursts were about things that had happened at work or something she'd done or that she'd never gotten pregnant again. She'd been afraid to ask. She'd hoped after he retired things would be different. Now she would never know.

Edna wheeled her cart to the chicken cooler and after scrutinizing the size, weight, date, and price, put a three-pack of breasts in her cart. She made her way to lemons. She'd had a craving all week for the lemon cake she used to make for Hank on Sundays. As she sniffed one lemon after another testing for sweetness, an unkempt woman appeared beside her and began moving her hands through the air over the pink grapefruits. Her nails were dirty and the joints of her fingers were knobby. Edna had read that that came from too much knuckle-cracking. The woman wore a big silver ring with a milky white stone held in place with star-shaped prongs. Edna had seen her in the market before but not this close. Suddenly she felt another twinge in her pelvis and dropped her bag of lemons. She tried the breathing exercise again, but this time it didn't work. Edna put her hand over her belly and said to the cramp, "Knock it off."

"Were you talking to me?" The wiry woman had stringy blonde hair that hung over the sides of her face and Edna could see her nipples through her flimsy top.

"No, I wasn't."

"Am I in your way? I was just checking to see which of these grapefruits wanted to go home with me." The woman told Edna she'd just moved to town and was scouting the markets in Phoenix to see where she best resonated with the food. "Are you okay? You were holding your stomach."

"I'm fine." Edna snapped a plastic bag off the roll above her head.

"Are you sure you don't need some help? I could at least pick out some lemons for you. I just need to touch your arm so I can feel your energy."

"No, thank you." Edna pulled her shoulders back.

"I love that you're wearing a Christmas tree in the summertime. I do that. Leave my tree up all year long."

"If you must know, it has nothing to do with Christmas. It just so happens December 25th is my birthday. This is a birthday pin." Edna was tired of feeling obligated to speak and exchange smiles with strangers. Even when she was young, men she didn't know would come right up to her on a street corner and say, "Smile, honey. It can't be all that bad." Now that she was older and a widow, she realized she could get away with things like bumping into people who were in her way or stepping on their feet and then pretending she'd lost her balance, which she decided to do with the barefooted woman now.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"It's okay." The woman picked up her foot and began massaging her big toe. "I understand where you're coming from."

"What? It was an accident." Edna spun her cart around and headed for the liquor aisle to get her usual half-gallon of Ancient Age. Before checking out, she picked up some frozen dinners and a Sara Lee fudge cake. Thank God two people came up behind her in line before the grapefruit woman got there.

Two weeks after the first cramps in the market, while Edna walked to the mailbox in the breezeway, another pain shot through her pelvis. Her ankles wobbled. She had to lean into the cool beige bricks that Hank had had shipped in from Pennsylvania, the couple's birthplace. She waited for the pain to subside, standing so close to the bricks she could almost smell the farm in New Castle where she grew up.

The next morning, Edna saw an introductory coupon in the *Arizona Republic* for six sessions at the new Shapely Body Institute that had just opened in Scottsdale. She thought maybe some exercise would help the cramps. A few years ago the building had been The Arizona Bank. It looked the same except for the Mexican pots full of marigolds at the entrance and the silhouettes of women with hourglass figures that had been painted on the windows. They reminded Edna of the ones she'd seen on the mudflaps

of semi-trucks. Inside, the lights were too bright and the technicians too young and perky. She left her sunglasses on. Crystal, Edna's technician, told her she was going to feel great and lose inches to boot.

"Where did your parents get that name?" Edna asked.

"From TV."

"I thought so." Edna would never have named a child Crystal.

At each session, Crystal strapped Edna onto five different table machines designed to pulsate a specific area of her body. Afterwards, Edna had more energy but she also felt a slight dizziness that bothered her the rest of the day.

At the end of the series, Crystal whipped out her tape measure and in a voice of high-pitched enthusiasm said, "Look, Mrs. Harwood. You've lost a half an inch around your stomach."

Edna didn't believe her. It didn't matter anyway. She was still having painful twinges and in the past week a falling-out feeling somewhere in her lower abdomen added to her discomfort.

Dr. Mann's office building had a flat roof; a combination of saguaro and barrel cactus grew in the courtyard.

Edna endured smiling nurses wearing plastic gloves, their hands frozen-looking as they aimed needles at her veins and dragged sticky rubber-tipped wands over her pelvis. She held her breath for the gynecological exam.

"So, how long before I kick the bucket?" she asked Dr. Mann. "I'm no spring chicken."

He laughed. "If we get that baby carriage out of there, you just might live forever."

"Baby carriage?" she asked.

"The uterus. After a certain age, it's just a cancer breeder," said Dr. Mann, leaning back in his leather chair.

"Do I have cancer?"

"Benign fibroid tumors. You need a hysterectomy."

"I've never been cut open in my life," Edna said, recoiling from the doctor. "My husband died in surgery. Can't I take a pill or something?"

Dr. Mann chuckled. "That won't do it. We need to get in there." He presented a plastic model of a woman's lower body. "Now," he said, "if we just cut you in two—"

Edna started to shiver and buttoned up her sweater. She crossed her arms over her breasts.

He snapped the plastic torso in half with his thick fingers and pointed with a pencil to where in her body the tumors were growing. "These tumors are very common in women who haven't had children."

"That miscarriage wasn't my fault," said Edna. "The doctor said so. I

just never got pregnant again.”

“I have a theory that in some women the tumors are an attempt to grow the baby they never had.”

“That’s the craziest thing I ever heard. What if I don’t have the surgery? What happens?”

“It could get worse. Most women say it’s the best thing they ever did, the surgery. Besides, it’s not like you’re going to have any children now. We can leave the ovaries if you like.”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

Dr. Mann frowned. “It’s a preventative measure for someone your age. You shouldn’t wait too long.”

That night, after two shots of bourbon to ease the pain, Edna ran a bath. Lying in the tub, she probed her pelvis with her fingers, trying to feel the tumors. She thought she’d wanted children, but maybe she’d lied to herself and that’s why she’d miscarried and never gotten pregnant again. Now the tumors were paying her back. Edna closed her eyes and tried to imagine what her children would have looked like, taking her to an expensive restaurant on Mother’s Day, leading her to a table, her son pulling out her chair. The muscles around her eyes softened. She let her body sink deeper into the warm water, resting the bones of her neck on the tub pillow.

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The falling-out feeling grew worse. It made her legs weak. She had to lie down in the dewy grass of her backyard one morning as she snipped buds from a rose bush. The doves cooed and she cooed back. She’d gotten so good at making their sound she thought they saw her as one of them. Now, they came close and nudged gently, tickling, caressing her bare ankles with their tiny soft-feathered heads. The sun struck out and appeared over the boat-shed roof. A whole house for a boat. What a crazy thing, she thought. Waves of orange heat penetrated Edna’s body as she fell asleep in the grass, the crown of the magnolia tree spread over her like a shield.

Edna awoke to someone’s voice.

“You-hoo. Are you hurt?”

Edna squinted into the sun and saw a blonde-haired woman on the ledge of the backyard wall by the shed, perched on her hands and feet like a spider with giant hairless limbs ready to crawl down the bricks.

"I'm coming over," she said. The woman jumped into the yard. She wore a white Western skirt and a tank top trimmed with tiny silver bells. Strands of seashells encircled her left arm and rattled when she walked.

"Who are you?" Edna said.

"I'm Luna. I was walking back there and I picked up your vibration."

"What?"

Luna began chanting, softly at first, and then made sounds Edna had never heard before. Deep guttural noises, like growling. Edna's muscles tensed. "You'd better stop that," she said.

"I sensed there was a sister in trouble on the other side of those bricks. Can you get up?"

"I don't know. I fell asleep." Edna rolled over and tried to push herself up. "My legs are too weak. Don't I know you?"

"From the market." Luna kneeled beside Edna. "Just lie back," she said.

"How did you climb over that wall?"

Luna closed her eyes and made circles with her hands over Edna's pelvis. Low mumbling noises came from her throat. Seashells softly jangled.

"What are you doing?" asked Edna.

"Wow. What's going on here? I feel a lot of heat."

"That's because it's hot out here."

"This may seem strange to you, but I'd like to send some sound into this area."

"What?" Edna felt trapped. What if this woman went in the house? She could steal me blind, she thought.

Luna began chanting, softly at first, and then made sounds Edna had never heard before. Deep guttural noises, like growling. Edna's muscles tensed. "You'd better stop that," she said. She wondered if the Mormon neighbors could hear. She used to close the windows when Hank got too loud, when his voice would boom across the dining room table like a carnival barker.

After a few minutes Luna stood and said, "Let's see if you can get up now."

The afternoon sun hung heavy on the leaves of the magnolia tree. Edna's whole body began to perspire. She felt something penetrate her thin limbs like a pale light that helped lift her through gravity. She rose up, balancing herself against Luna's body. "Well, I'll be darned."

"A doctor told me once that I was better than ultrasound."

"Part of that sounded like you were saying someone's name." said Edna, her legs still wobbling.

"Bau-Gula and Sophia, the black Madonna. The Goddesses of Healing and Body Wisdom. I forgot to ask you your name."

"Edna. Can I offer you a drink?"

"No. I have to go. You should be able to walk now. I'll come back next week."

"Where do you live?"

"At the Papago Trailer Park," Luna said. "On McDowell Road, near downtown."

How could anyone live in a trailer? thought Edna.

After Luna's visit, Edna had no desire for her usual afternoon shots of bourbon. She played a quick game of solitaire and went to bed. She slept for twelve hours instead of her usual six.

As days passed, it seemed her cramps had lessened. I'm just fine after all, she thought. I must have been out of my mind agreeing to let that woman come back.

The next Wednesday morning at eight o'clock, Luna rang the front doorbell. She carried a straw bag containing two drums, drawing pads, crayons, silver bells, and what looked like bunches of weeds.

The two women sat at the kitchen table and drank goldenrod tea from china cups. "For the shrinking of tumors," Luna said.

"How is that possible from this weak yellow tea? It smells awful." Edna pursed her lips and blew on the liquid.

"People don't understand the power of herbs."

"Luna—that's an unusual name. How did your mother decide on it?"

"Oh. She didn't. I changed it when I was nine. I needed to be under a different vibration than what she chose for me. She didn't know who I was."

"A mother always knows."

"She didn't. She told me I couldn't have a Spanish name. I love the Spanish language. My favorite word is maquillaje. It means make-up. Have some more tea, Edna." Luna dunked the little basket of herbs in the water of Edna's grandmother's hand-painted china teapot.

"Is that stuff going to leave stains? I've hardly used that pot."

"Well, maybe it's about time you did."

"How do you know about herbs and whatever it is you did to me in the yard?"

"It all started when I was a kid. My Camp Fire Girl troop took a trip to Montezuma's castle. I felt Indian power. Heard the low hollow sound of rattles, and the voice of an ancient man told me to look for a comet in the night sky. When I saw it shoot past the moon, lying awake in my sleeping bag that evening, I knew I had a gift for healing."

"My, my. That's quite a story," Edna said. What if she was a witch? Edna noticed that today Luna wore a cheap-looking ankle bracelet and a huge metal ring with what appeared to be the body of a naked woman on the

front. "Is that one of those goddesses you mentioned?" Edna asked pointing at the ring.

"Yes. Sophia." Luna moved her bony hand toward Edna so she could get a better look.

"Very nice." Edna sipped at her tea.

Luna's gaze stayed steady on Edna the whole time. Edna felt hypnotized. She took breaks by intermittently looking over Luna's shoulder, out at the backyard or down at her tea.

"So how long have you lived at the trailer park?" Maybe while Luna was talking, which she obviously loved to do, she could think of a way to get her out of the house.

"Only a couple of months. I like Darryl, the manager. The first day I arrived he gave me a vap cooler for free, though I told him I'd pay for it. We spent the afternoon together drinking beer. When he switched on the TV and the topless maids came on, he said, 'Wow, look at that. That's really something.' Whenever a man gets excited I feel funny if I don't do something about it. Have you ever felt that way?"

Edna thought about how she felt when Hank wanted to have sex. "Maybe with my husband. Certainly not with a stranger." After the miscarriage, sex with Hank had felt like a pressure-filled obligation that she eased with a shot of bourbon or a martini. She took to masturbating when Hank was asleep. She wondered if that meant she was a lesbian. She'd tried looking at women in a sexual way but never felt anything.

"I hope I'm not shocking you." Luna poured Edna some more tea.

"Not at all." Edna buttoned the top button of her blouse. What have I gotten myself into? I could use a shot of bourbon now, she thought.

"So anyway, I raised up my squaw skirt, my favorite one with the arrowhead print, turned onto my back and we did it on the couch. Did you know that the word squaw means vagina?"

"Well. That's very interesting."

"Before I came here I lived in Wickenburg."

"Oh," said Edna, relieved to hear something she could relate to. "I drove to Wickenburg once to blow the carbon out of the car engine. My husband taught me to do that."

"I had to get out of there. The people are so narrow-minded. I felt like my skin was shrinking up. Know what I mean?"

Edna did know what she meant. She felt like that herself, like she was drying up little by little. Luna reminded her of other people she'd met in the barren dryness of this desert town—strange, stubborn people like the odd-shaped saguaro cactus that seemed to grow strictly out of an insistence to be alive, or the tenacious weeds that pushed through cracked earth, desert floors, rocks, and the Indian caves that she'd read about in *Arizona Highways*. The longer she lived here, the more she felt like one of them.

Edna felt another cramp in her pelvis. Even if Luna was a witch, maybe she could help. She'd tried everything else and she didn't want to be cut open. What did she have to lose? She told Luna about her visit to Dr. Mann. "I don't trust him. What do you think?"

"Our bodies belong to us," said Luna. "We're going to reclaim your uterus, Edna."

"We are?"

"But first we have to clear this house. Who lived here with you?"

"My husband, Hank."

"It's time to say good-bye to Hank." Luna handed Edna an Indian bell. She lit two little bundles of cedar and sage. They started in the kitchen and wandered from room to room ringing the bells and waving smoky sticks through the air.

"I hope this doesn't ruin the wallpaper," said Edna.

When they got to the bedroom, Edna stopped ringing. She picked up a photo album from the dresser and showed Luna the pictures.

It looked as if she'd had a marvelous life with Hank, and at first she had, sitting in supper clubs with a big-mouthed smile on her face, a pair of stone martens nestled across her chest, their little faces hanging from her shoulder, or dancing and eating "two fingered poi" at luaus in Honolulu with a thick ring of sweet flowers around her neck. After a few years, she'd had to drink to look that happy. She couldn't remember if it was before or after the miscarriage. She took to carrying a silver flask with mother of pearl inlay in her handbag and hiding a bottle in the guest bathroom toilet tank of their home. Edna couldn't admit, even to herself, that she'd actually felt relieved when the pregnancy ended.

Luna closed the album.

"I wish he hadn't died so soon."

"Ring that bell loud, Edna." Luna walked around the bedroom making sure the cleansing smoke from the cedar and sage sticks hit every corner.

They moved on to the living room.

Edna sat on the plastic-covered sofa. "He wasn't perfect, but I miss him."

"I know." Luna made a crunching sound as she sat beside Edna.

"Were you ever married?"

"Briefly. To an airline pilot. I tried to heal him, tried to cure his woundedness, but it didn't work. I thought my healing powers had turned on me."

Luna reminded her of other people she'd met in the barren dryness of this desert town—strange, stubborn people like the odd-shaped saguaro cactus that seemed to grow strictly out of an insistence to be alive, or the tenacious weeds that pushed through cracked earth, desert floors, rocks, and the Indian caves that she'd read about in ARIZONA HIGHWAYS.

"I guess you don't miss him."

"I did at first. I wasn't used to being alone."

"Hank was a self-made man. He left that furniture store his family owned. We struggled for a while, but he borrowed some money and started his own trucking business. Everyone thought he was so generous. He put some of his relatives through college. I think I always wanted to be like him."

Back at the kitchen table, Luna encouraged Edna to do a drawing.

"If this is supposed to be my uterus, it looks diseased," said Edna holding up the red and black blobbed drawing for Luna to see.

"Everyone comes into this world with their head between a woman's legs. Think about that."

"But I never had any children."

"Children are only one form of creativity. Look at nature."

They performed a drumming ritual in the backyard by the swimming pool. "To awaken your healing energy," Luna said.

Edna felt embarrassed. She closed her eyes and tried to follow Luna's deepening voice with her own. She tapped the drum tentatively. What if the neighbors heard?

"Try to make the sound from your inner core." Luna sat cross-legged moving her upper body in time to her drum rhythm. "Embrace yourself."

"I feel so tired."

"Let's rest."

The two women lay down on their backs in the afternoon sun. A dry desert breeze lifted grass smells to their faces and made an eddy of the swimming pool water.

"Look," said Luna. "The tree is making shapes for us."

"Where?"

"There. See the snake?" Luna pointed to the left side of the magnolia. "And over there, a rooster and a cat."

"Oh, I see the cat. Do you want to stay for dinner?"

"I have to go. You know the day I climbed over your wall to help you, everything changed. I posted a flyer at the health food store and I'm getting calls from people who need my gift."

"I'm glad." Edna rolled onto her belly.

"I'll come back tomorrow. I think we should do a twenty-one-day letting-go-of-grief ritual."

Later that day, Edna got a call from Mary, one of the Mormon neighbors. "This is the Palmer Estates. I don't know what's going on over there, but we have restrictions about what you can and cannot do."

"I'll do what I damn well please," Edna said, and hung up. She pattered around the house rearranging the Dresden dolls in the curio cabinets and

considered taking the plastic cover off the living room couch. She ran a bath with the lavender oil Luna had given her. The scent reminded her of years ago when she'd been pregnant and Hank had massaged her feet every night with some kind of lotion he'd bought on his own along with a chart that showed all the bones and muscles in the foot. Sometimes he pressed too hard but she didn't say anything. It felt like he was talking to the baby.

After her bath, Edna went to sleep. She awoke at four in the morning and found herself feeling comforted by her own hand resting between her thighs, soft feet rubbing together under the white cotton sheets that she'd sun-dried on the clothesline. And the low-pitched cooing of the mourning doves began. ❖