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Our Time

Cory Bailey

Ms. Fresham didn't want to meet with Mary, her boss's daughter. She wanted to conduct the interview herself, and she was seizing at every chance to change Mr. Hawkley's mind. He was on the other end of the phone into which Ms. Fresham was yelling. "Now look here, Mr. Hawkley," she said, "I know time is money, but these are people, real people with real stories." She stood with one hand on the handset and the other on her hip. "This is big. Do you really think this appropriate for a child—your child?" A pause. "Not that there is anything wrong with your daughter in particular, I just mean this case requires special care."

Mr. Hawkley didn't respond. He just gave a sharp sigh. "Mary has been to *YOUR Magazine* before," Ms. Fresham said still on the phone, her voice two octaves lower and three times louder than anyone else's. "She could help you with your paperwork. This story is too important and Mr. Hawkley should never have put me in this situation," Ms. Fresham said to Jones, her receptionist and on-and-off boyfriend, whose face was buried in a stack of papers that made his desk resemble a white fifth avenue.

Jones said, "If you don't want to get sent to his office again, why don't you just let Mary talk to the guy?" He was flipping through her last article, "Daring Dave Saves Dodge Dodging Dog," a short piece on Dave Sanchez's rescue of a stray poodle from traffic.

"She wouldn't let that man speak to meet God for a day," Ms. Fresham said without putting down the phone. "Afraid she'd miss the spotlight or someone might disagree with her."

"No, but what would you do if Mr. Hawkley decided he needed a different 'Creative Corner' columnist?" Jones asked.

"I'd flip my finger and my hair and tell him to kiss my—"

"Jesus, Janet, he's still on the phone!"

A few grunts later Ms. Fresham put the phone down. "All right," she said, "just remember, when she gets here, I don't want any moans because I told you so."

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The next morning Ms. Fresham was the first one at the office, ready to meet Mary. She had her long, black messenger bag that looked like the

skin of an overripe banana, and inside she was hiding a tape recorder. Mary was going to the interview today with Mr. Blake Poll, town hero, so she was going to take the bag. Ms. Fresham wore a purple cotton dress with white lilies on the skirt and a green lace scarf with suns sewn into the fabric. Her hair was richly dyed red and trimmed with black tips, and at her neckline she had tattooed a flight of dragonflies. In another context one might've thought her the owner of a thrift store.

Jones sat at the desk in front of the office at 9:14. He wrote down the time because Ms. Fresham wanted to give a full report on Mary's work, and Mary said she'd be there "that morning." 9:14 seemed a little past morning to Ms. Fresham. It took thirteen more minutes for Mary to arrive.

The young girl strolled into the office, removing her pink sunglasses and putting them with her purse by the door. Mary said she thought it was a good day for driving, neither too sunny nor too hot, and she suggested they let her take the company convertible to visit Mr. Poll.

"I'll go the long way to Mountain Pass so we can drive through the forest," Mary said.

"If you weren't already late," said Ms. Fresham, "you could do whatever you like. Asheville has plenty of trees for you to see another time."

"It's just such a beautiful day and I haven't been home that long, being in lousy Georgia to see family." Mary never would've said this in front of her father.

"Amen to that," said Jones, raising his mug. The first time he'd agreed with the girl.

"Ms. Fresham! I nearly forgot," said Mary, rummaging through her purse on his desk, "I have your cards for this week and a piece of fudge to go with them." Every time Mary came around she brought everyone a card with a bible verse she thought they needed. Sometimes there was candy. "John 3:23. You still haven't been baptized and I don't want you to go to hell," she said.

"And here's one for you Jones, with an extra piece of fudge. You're too skinny." Jones reached through the main street of papers and took the plastic bag holding the card and dessert.

"Wouldn't this be one hell of a sitcom?" Ms. Fresham said to Jones after Mary turned away and walked to her purse again. Ms. Fresham tossed the card into the trash.

"She's right, you're probably going to hell," Jones said, "but not because you're not baptized." They both laughed, but Mary didn't seem to hear.

Mr. Hawkley had offered to bring in dessert once a week. Everyone told him no because they were all afraid he would put something in the cookies if he heard what they said about Mary. He would roll his eyes at their refusal, screw up his mouth, and turn red. Occasionally he kicked a trashcan over. "I don't ever know how to satisfy you animals. You're like a zoo that doesn't like food or attention, but somehow you get the job done. Maybe the good Lord is teaching me a lesson," he'd say and leave.

"Where's the holy water?" Jones' would ask.

"Comes out of their tap," Ms. Fresham joked.

When Mary finished passing out all the cards she brought, Ms. Fresham opened the black messenger bag and told her she would tell her about the interview if she kept quiet. She explained the story of how, before being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, Mr. Blake Poll started a fund to aid the homeless in their area, giving more than two hundred families a place to live. He stayed at home now with his wife, Louisa Poll, in Mountain Pass so that his later days would be comfortable. Because of that, Ms. Fresham said, getting his quotes for her column piece had to be done with special care and respect. The story affected Mary so deeply that she began to cry, but no one else thought enough about her to do anything. She said she couldn't believe she was the only one touched by Ms. Fresham's recounting of his life and that they would do well to attend church that next Sunday.

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Mary took the black messenger back from Ms. Fresham and didn't stop until she got to the Poll's home, which took approximately an hour because she drove so slowly.

The house next door was so small and decrepit it could hardly be called a home. The one she stood at now was only slightly better. She knocked, one of those light, no-one-probably-heard-you knocks and waited. A woman appeared and without hesitation motioned her inside.

Mary entered a long, dark room with a fireplace at one end and a hospital bed in the middle. The woman, Mrs. Poll, moved to the kitchen and looked at her husband, a small, frail man in a wheelchair by the fireplace. His skin was reminiscent of textured glass, stained with the pastel colors of bruises and age. She sat a cup out on the table with water and two blue pills before anyone spoke.

"I'm Mary." She had on a pink blouse trimmed with lace at the neckline, white pants, and had pinned a yellow daisy in her blond hair. If anyone had come in, they might think someone had painted the room gray just to accent her.

"Isn't she cute?" Mrs. Poll said, leaning over to her husband. "Now

take these before you get started.”

“No I certainly won’t,” he said. “They only make me sleepy and I want to be in my right mind for this.” He motioned them away, but a sharp jerk of his hand hit the cup from her hold. They moved as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“Isn’t she cute?” he asked his wife, motioning for Mary to come closer.

Mrs. Poll didn’t say anything and put the pills back in their bottle. “You’ll take these right after.”

Mary sat down opposite Mr. Poll and rummaged through her bag for a pen and notebook. Her hand stayed steady; she was always good at meeting new people. “Mr. Blake Poll, yes? I’m Mary and will be interviewing you today. Mr. Hawkey is my father,” she said as if it meant something. “I have some questions to ask you to guide you in case you need help.” She spoke loudly and didn’t break eye contact. “What motivated you to start your fundraiser?”

“Well, it was forty years ago,” he said softly, “and I myself was homeless. My sister had just hit it big time with her first novel and had some money to spare. I made clocks out of old parts so I used the money to get a proper shop. I named it Our Time.” He stared into the fire. Mrs. Poll remained seated behind them at the kitchen table. “I slept in the shop to save all the money I could. I expanded and started giving back to my friends, since all my friends were homeless then. They’d help me in the shop and soon enough a few had some money to get their own place. It took off from there,” he said. His face was emotionless and his body still except his hands trembled as he scratched his thigh.

“Where did you sleep?”

“The aristocrats had tents, but most of us just slept on benches.” The way he slurred his O’s made it hard for Mary to understand.

“He got two broken wrists and a dislocated hip from a fight for the benches,” Mrs. Poll said. Benches and tents. Benches and tents and clocks and money. Their world was built on hardtop beds and scrap metal trinkets.

“So your sister inspired you?” Mary asked.

“I wouldn’t say inspired but without her I couldn’t have started.”

“So your friends were the reason?”

“I’d like to think so. Maybe I just wanted food and a roof, but I gave that money to my friends so they could have that too.”

“God did great things for you, not your friends,” Mary said, finally starting writing.

“Oh no, I don’t believe in any God. I’ve got all I need right here.” His wife had moved to stand behind his chair, brushing what was left of his hair.

“But you couldn’t have done any of this without God.” She stopped writing and closed the notebook.

“Have you ever known someone without a home?” the old man asked. His wife cautioned him with a firm hand as he learned forward.

“My father was homeless, but God saved him and now he doesn’t want for anything.” She couldn’t look him in the eye anymore. Her father had been abandoned on the steps of Central Children’s Home of North Carolina. She thought the Polls might resemble the couple that took him home and called him Jasper even though his birth certificate said Sam. Her mother would always tear up at the story but Mary didn’t think it was any good. She said God saved her father from something bad and that’s all she thought, but now Mr. Poll had brought up some other feelings inside of her. She felt like her mother.

Mrs. Poll went into the kitchen for some juice. The cups were plastic and the tray was an unpolished copper and the sweet apple tickled her nose. She and Mary discussed better times. The wife said that, in her opinion, nothing was to blame for the way things were now. She said the way her husband acted you would think he were a saint and he’d live forever and Mary said it was no use saying that because no one lives forever. Mr. Poll sat in his chair staring into the red fire and jerked his hand at an invisible fly.

“Is there anything you want to add to the story?” Mary asked.

“I would love—” he paused. Mary had gotten used to the way he talked, holding out his L’s.

“My husband has trouble finding his words at times. He is humble and he is kind. He doesn’t want the recognition he deserves, but he deserves for everyone to know.” She stood behind her husband again, stroking his hair.

“Of course,” Mary said. “So you really don’t believe?”

“Just because we wouldn’t see you on a Sunday morning doesn’t mean we’re bad people, Ms. Hawkeye,” said Ms. Poll.

“It was our time, Mary, back in the day it truly was,” the old man said.

She closed her notebook for a second time and picked up the messenger bag. She left the old house, which felt a little more like a home now. It was nearly noon, but clouds covered the sun and the ground was wet. She walked through a swirl of thick mud and recalled the times when there was

no home for her father and there was no God to her and Hell was a bedtime story. She took the long way back and drove a little faster towards *YOUR Magazine*, her thoughts settling like thick smog.

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Ms. Fresham wrote: It's closing time and she's late. She'd waited four hours more than expected. Jones was gone and the phone had stopped ringing. She left the office and grabbed for the black messenger bag that wasn't there and walked across the street to her usual coffee house.

"Cinnamon latte. Large."

"2.95. How're you, Janet?"

"Little girl's going to ruin me."

She sat down in the back and lit a cigarette. The small room calmed her like her dad's leather jacket, too big for a small girl.

She'd quietly hoped Mr. Poll would be good for Mary. Ms. Fresham was aware of Mr. Hawkley's past and the Poll's beliefs; she was a reporter after all. "Christmas Miracle: Young Mary Sees Reality" came to her. She laughed. Jones would've hit her with his morning newspaper over their cubicle divide.

She set paisley notebook and fountain pen on the table. *Mr. Hawkley, Mary's performance today*—, she started. As Ms. Fresham began her report the door opened and Mary came in with the black messenger bag around her. Neither spoke as she sat down in the same booth.

"That cigarette will kill you." Mary looked down, fondling the golden cross she wore around her neck.

"You want anything?" Ms. Fresham said.

"No."

"How'd it go?" She slid the unfinished report under a menu. Mary began to cry quietly. She threw the bag across the booth not wanting to touch it anymore. Ms. Fresham flushed red and put out the cigarette. Had she won? She leaned into the table. Mary closed her eyes and dropped the cross onto the table and just missed the cinnamon drink. "Cinnamon Cross." She found that catchier, but she didn't laugh as she sat the golden cross back on Mary's lap.

"A good God can be hard to find," Ms. Fresham said and took the black bag from its landing place on the floor. The tape recorder had run out long ago. "Off the record, babe: Keep that cross or throw it away, but first take a piece of fudge."