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The Wrong End of the Knife

by Celia Jeffries

Lydia had waited a long time for this kind of emptiness in her life. Her family, what is left of it, wanted her to keep one of the nurses or housekeepers. "How can a woman live alone?" her son Greg said. But Lydia likes being by herself now. She wakes each morning, wraps her robe around her body, and shuffles off to the kitchen. Her hands find the kettle and the door of the refrigerator and the handle of the drawer, and she settles into the corner seat just as easily as she did each day of the last 65 years. She looks out the window, following the movements of the sugar maple, watching the leaves twisting and turning, following what must be shadows of birds in the trees.

Truth is, time is immense now. She melts into it, moving her bones when they press too hard against the back of the chair, sliding her feet across the floor from room to room, content that no one remains in the house to tell her what needs to be done.

A quiet house at last. No parents in the upstairs suite, no grandchildren impatient for Sunday dinner, no husband surrounded by nurses, secretaries, and financial advisors. Lydia knows the time now without bothering to look at a clock. The sun tracks its light and shadows across the walls of the house minute by minute. The paper arrives, announcing the day, the month, and the year. And on Thursdays, Tilly comes for the grocery order. Two months since George Hughes' body was shipped to the Harvard Medical School repository for cadavers, and Lydia is content. This is her house now. Her house and her things. The samovar in the study. The desk her father made out of her piano. The hat she rescued from the summer home. And her plants, her gardenias and lotus, in the conservatory. For the first time in 95 years, Lydia's life is her own.

"Are you ready, girl? It's going be a hard day today, the missus is whining, and the trolley is creaking, and the leaves on the trees, see them?"

They're turning their backsides up to the sky. It's going to storm before long, get your rain clothes out. Girl, don't you go out without them now. I'm taking this tray upstairs to your mother, and I'll get your eggs on the plate the second I walk back in here, don't you fret. It's going be a hard day, but we can start it right, can't we?"

Mamie fusses over the spoon bread and pear chutney, moving her arm deftly across the counter to lay out the breakfast tray, all the while talking to Lydia in a continuous, quiet stream.

"I don't know what's gotten into your sister, she's staring in that mirror again like she's met someone new. Go on out there and fetch her from the hall while I get this upstairs. And for heaven's sake, keep your eye on that stove.

Lydia looks up at the stove, then back at the open book on the table in front of her. "Margaret," she calls, "time to sit. Mamie's on her way upstairs."

"How does this look?" Margaret stands before the mirror, tying a ribbon through hair.

"Lovely," Lydia says, her eyes still on the book before her.

"I don't know, I'm not sure," Margaret says. "Maybe I should cut it all off; what do you think, Lydia?"

"Fine, it looks fine."

"What do you know? Your head is always in a book. Men don't want bookish girls."

Lydia lifts her eyes to the stove, sighs, and then crosses the room to turn off the gas. George's nurses cautioned her daily, then walked her through many simple tasks, helping her define movements to accommodate bones, muscles, and joints. She bristled then, telling them she knew how to take care of things in her own kitchen. Now that she is alone, she follows their instructions unequivocally.



The can opener is what usually undoes her. Lydia never uses the electric one sitting on the counter, ready to whirl around the lid at the press of a button. Instead, she reaches into the drawer and pulls out the spear she used all her life, working hard to fit her fingers around the handle and press down on the tooth. More often than not, the can slips out of her grip, and the opener jams down into the counter. A whole section of the counter is imprinted from such attempts. When the whistling stops, Lydia uses both hands to lift the kettle off the stove and fills the coffeemaker she bought in Paris thirty years ago. She leans close to see when the water turns from brown to chocolate, then carefully pours the liquid into a large china cup. She slides her feet forward, carrying it back to the table where she places it to the right of the newspaper.

Lydia takes a sip, then opens the paper out on the table. Nothing registers. For a while she managed to read books from the library, but even those are beyond her now. When she does read, it is with a magnifying glass she holds down on the page and moves across like a woman ironing in slow motion. In truth, reading ended for her long before the last eye operation. When she looks at the paper now, it's a black-and-white puzzle, with blocks of gray and lines running throughout. She keeps it at the table to check the date and to remind her of the year. That's what they want to know.

"Do you know what day it is, Mrs. Hughes?"

"And what year is it?"

"Who is the president?"

If she couldn't answer that, they'd try to move her to one of those places where they keep old folks now. This happened to friends.

"Oh Miss Lydia, you are so slow today," Mamie calls. "Move yourself along now, there's tea in the pot and jam here on the sideboard. And that bell, it's ringing upstairs. You in university and your sister married, I seem to run more 'stead a less. It's a wonder to me how that happened. Don't forget those books in the hall. I tell you, girl, you're

gonna lose your eyesight before you see what's really worth seeing. All that reading, day in and day out, up late with that electric light. People's eyes going bad early. My granny, she saw the world whole, till the day she died. Ninety-eight she was and her eyes wide open, watching the Lord reaching down to take her up. Big, wide eyes looking straight at Him. Gotta save your eyes for that final look, that's what I say."

Lydia slides the magnifying glass up to the top of the page and peers intently at the date: Monday, October 12, 1919. She blinks and squints her eyes, trying to focus. That can't be right. She leans far over the table and holds the glass firmly down on the newspaper. Monday, October 12, 1991. You can lose a whole lifetime with the switch of two numbers. She looks back up at the patches of yellow moving back and forth in the window, the yellow that feels so soft on her eyes. It is a fine, clear day, and she hears the call of a cardinal, although the flash of red is too quick for her eyes to catch. Must be cool outside. The sharp breeze sends the yellows tossing and twirling. Occasionally, one loosens from the branch and lifts into the air before passing out of the frame of the window. Lydia looks down at her hands lying quiet in her lap and allows her eyelids to close. They feel cool and damp on her eyeballs.



All this sunlight. It's hard to focus sometimes. Lydia has to squint hard. And after driving the rig all morning, she goes into the farmhouse and stands there blind as a fish for a minute or two, instinctively turning her head toward the voice of the woman she has come to train.

"You Miss Johnson? From the County Extension?" The voice is not welcoming.

"Yes." Lydia smiles, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the light, waiting to see a jawline and arms folded across a chest.

"Think I don't know how to feed my family?" The woman stands in the middle of the room hold-



ing a basket of tomatoes. On the table beside her sits a crate of potatoes.

Lydia unbuttons her gloves and bows her head slightly before the woman. "Pleased to meet you," she says, but does not offer her hand.

The county extension sends her out on the easiest route they can manage, but still it's tiring, riding in the light and then sitting in the dark, talking with the farmer's wife, trying to make the woman comfortable, trying not to appear to be too much of what she is: the woman from the city who thinks she knows more about how to process food than these women who planted, watered, harvested, and cooked for their families, often for more years than Lydia had lived. But times are tough. People managed, yes, but now there are such simple things to do to avoid all the illnesses out there. Canning food was something people thought they knew, but they didn't know it all. Lydia wants to help.

"Well, girl," Mamie says, "it's a cheerless day, seeing you home so soon. I know you wanted to stay in that job. Not that I ever understood. Riding around the countryside, teaching people to cook. Strange thing for a young lady like you. But who am I to say? Been staying in one place cooking all my life. It's not enough now, sad to say. I'm sure your father had no choice. Lord knows he's never known what to do with your mother. She's always been so delicate, life exhausts her. Can't expect that to change. We need a lady to run the house. I can still cook and clean, but we need a lady to make the decisions, and I see you're that lady now. No need to ride around the countryside, you just come on down here in the mornings and sit at the kitchen table like we used to, just turn things around a bit. You do the talking now, tell me what's to do for the day. I like that idea, I do. It's not such a bad day after all, is it, girl? I mean Miss Johnson."

Lydia opens her eyes. A number of strips appear on the counter, but from the table she can't distinguish one from the other. She lifts herself up from

the cushioned seat and, taking a breath, shuffles across the floor. When she reaches the sink, she opens her gnarled hand, finger by finger, then taps gingerly across the counter. Knives were always something she prided herself on. Even those nurses were impressed by how well she handled herself in the kitchen. Shouldn't have been such a surprise. In her day, a degree in home economics was not for the lazy or undecided. She studied architecture, medicine, and engineering. It bewildered her what had happened to food in her lifetime. Used to be the cornerstone of life, the most important decision of the day. When she took over her father's household, planning meals drew all her knowledge of health and resources. But today, some of those nurses actually brought in already-cooked meals; "fast food" they called it. Garbage really. Nothing that could heal the unwell or sustain the living.

Where is that bread knife? Lydia looks down at the streaks on the Formica and reaches out, but there's nothing there. She lifts her hand and stares at it, squinting at the stone that flashes on her left ring finger.

"I tell you, Miss Lydia, George Hughes is an odd one. Stood at the door a full five minutes before ringin' that bell. A stick in the glass of the door, so tall and skinny. And look at the tatters he wears. Maybe not tatters, but not what other fellows wear. Your mother, now, she's not up to meeting these suitors, but I'm looking, I've got my eyes open, and when I go upstairs, she always asks. 'What's this one look like, Mamie?' she says, and I think, what can I do? A mother wants to know. This is the most important time in your life. She wants to know, so I tell her, I tell her what I see. 'He's from the country,' I say. She knows what I mean. Maybe he's going to school here, maybe he's as smart as they say, but I can see shoes that have walked on ground, and I can smell wool that's been out in the wet too long. He doesn't sit comfortably in your mamma's room. What can I do? I see the look in your eyes, you're tired of this house and these people. I know the sap



is running through your veins, don't blush at that, Miss Lydia, I remember those days. He looks good, though. And his people are good, from what I hear. So what if he came for Margaret first? He'll get the better deal with you, that's for sure. We'll just slice up this bread, and I'll take tea to your momma, and we'll figure out a way to make this work."

"It's not so far away," George said. But it was. Halfway across the country. On the Atlantic Ocean. The best technical school in the country. George couldn't pass up this offer. But what about her mother? Her father? Her life here in St. Louis? It didn't seem to be a problem. Now that she was married, no one seemed to need her or to worry about her.

"You do what a wife does," her mother said matter-of-factly. "You go where your husband goes."

"Boston Tech?" her father said. "Never heard of it. But I'm sure George knows what he's doing."

They took the train on a Thursday and sat up two nights in a row rather than spend money for the sleeper. George was excited and talked to strangers, something she had never seen him do before. When the train pulled out of Providence, the sky cracked open, and the rain made her jump out of her seat. She wasn't used to a land where you couldn't see what was ahead, where a storm cloud could sneak up on you and burst in your face. By the time they arrived in Boston, the sky was black. Inside the station, Red Caps ran about with right arms raised, hailing cabs. George would actually have spent the money for cab fare, but the school had sent a young man with an open car. The porter loaded their bags, then gently helped her in, spreading a newspaper over the seat. She pulled her hat down tightly on her head, gathered her coat around her body, and looked at her husband in the front seat, hatless and happy, a child from the backwoods.

"What have I done with my life?" she thought, as they drove through the streets, and her nose wrinkled up at the tang of what George later ex-

plained was salt air.



Lydia raises her head at the sound of a door slamming shut. Tilly? With groceries? No, today is Monday. No one has a key anymore except Dr. Grossman across the street, and he wouldn't be coming by at this time of day, this time of the week. Her son Greg only has time to telephone, not to visit. Lydia's breath becomes shallow as she tries to remember what she just heard. Was it memory? Or was it here, now, in the house? Lydia reaches up to the hook beside the back door and removes the fishing hat hanging there. With people in the house, the sound of a door slamming was not something to dwell on. But now such a sound is a puzzle.

Lydia stands in front of the window and waits to hear if another sound follows. That's what George would have done. George, who could hunt a rabbit down a hole. George, the MIT professor. "Logic rules life," George always said. "Look for what's different, what is not in the natural order." It worked for him. Until Eddy arrived. A beautiful, healthy baby, everyone doted on him. The family drew together every summer in a circle, brought to each other's sides by the arrival of the next generation. Her mother roused from her bed for whole days at a time, just to be in the room with the baby. Her father watched in silence. All was well with the world, until those moments when Eddy would tense his arms and legs, stare about, and begin to shriek. Then the family retreated to their territories, and George looked to Lydia to figure out what was wrong. She was alone then, so alone as she made the rounds from doctor to psychiatrist to neurologist and finally to surgeon.

Lydia brings her fingers down once more, finding the handle of the bread knife and taking a strong grip. Her breath comes in gasps, and her mind races as she struggles to find herself within the room. I'm facing the window over the sink, the stove is to the left, icebox to the right, stairs beside the door in the right-hand corner, table behind me.



This is my kitchen. Mother is not upstairs waiting for Mamie's afternoon visit. George is not standing in the hallway, looking like the last man on earth. No one is coming to dinner to discuss world affairs. Lydia has to tighten the muscles up the back of her spine, ignore the pain in her bones, and hold her body upright in order to locate herself clearly. Yes, I am here, she thinks, here on Lawson Road, here in my kitchen. And I am alone. Alone with the leaves flashing in the sunlight. Alone in the woods.

That summer, when the family settled into their slings hanging in the trees by the St. Lawrence, she slipped down the path to the water with a rod over her shoulder, bait in a pack, fishing hat on her head. No one put up a fuss. Things were so much more relaxed at the summer house. Father painted in his studio, and Mother spent most mornings sitting on the porch. They no longer complained when she was gone all afternoon. That had ended the day she came back with a string of pike that Mamie dredged in flour and flipped in the fry pan on the fire. Now when she gathered her gear and headed down the path, Father leaned out the open studio window to call, "Fish fry tonight?"

Eddy fished with her up until his fifth year. When she opened the catch to the lower shed that day, she heard him crying in his bunk on the porch. Just a whimper really, but she knew the sound. Eddy sat up and smiled through his tears when she tiptoed across the planks. She put her finger to her lips at the sight of his face. George would stop them if he heard their preparations. The doctor had said routine was essential to keep Eddy calm, and taking him fishing during naptime would definitely be breaking the routine. Eddy looked up, saw her gesture, and hid his face under the sheet.

"Shh, my sweet," she said. "Let's be quiet."

"Fish?" he whispered.

"Yes, fish," she said.

They left the porch by the ladder and managed to set off in the boat without capturing anyone's attention.

Lydia caught five pike that afternoon. Eddy squealed with delight at each one and grabbed the line, gently pulling them in. His hair glistened in the sun, and his legs sprang straight out in front of him each time he saw the glint of the fish fly out of the water.

When they paddled back to the boathouse, Lydia had to tell Eddy not to sing.

"We need to be quiet now," she said. "It's still naptime."

"Daddy sleep?" he said, his voice still a voice.

"Yes, Daddy's sleeping." She smiled.

Lydia tied up the boat and handed Eddy the creel to carry. She choked back a laugh at the sight of him struggling up the pier. She didn't see George sitting on the woodpile at the end of the dock.

"What the hell are you doing?" George stood up, his face red, his lips twitching.

Lydia dropped the gear at the sound of his voice.

"Did you take this child fishing?"

She didn't see Eddy pick up the hatchet. She didn't see the arms holding tight to the shaft, the black arc of the swing coming up behind George. She only saw her child's face, white with rage, old with fear, the face of the Eddy they all dreaded. When she cried out, George jumped at the strength of the five-year-old's thrust. Lydia's husband was unhurt. Her son never saw the river again.

Schizophrenia they called it. A deformation in the temporal lobe. An excision would put things right. George agreed. It was logical. Electrical impulses were going haywire. Cut out the problem and their boy would be restored to them.

Lydia stood before the hospital bed, her hands limp at her sides. Eddy, her little Eddy, lay in the bed, his head wrapped in cotton batting like a freshly boiled egg, upright in its cup, ready to be cracked. But he had already been cracked open. They had already sliced through the skull, pulled apart the white congealed membrane, and reached into the soft yellow tissue to remove the offensive



parts. You can't put an egg back together, she thought. All the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty together again.

"The operation was a success," the surgeon said. "He's unconscious now and may be unresponsive for awhile, but we're quite pleased. He will be a more docile person, you'll see." The surgeon smiled and let the door slam behind him.

Some moments pass before Lydia looks down and loosens her grip on the bread knife. There's blood on the counter, but she doesn't notice it as she feels the energy drain down her arms, down her torso, down her legs, and out her feet, until she finds herself leaning against the counter, wondering how to get across the floor to the table. Tea, she thinks, a cup of tea. She turns to her left and, running her hand in among the shadows of the leaves on the countertop, moves slowly toward the gas range, the centerpiece of the kitchen, the most familiar space in her life. George balked when she wanted to install it. Six burners, two ovens, and a shelf above for warming plates. Just last summer, the nurses called in a repairman for one of the burners, and the fellow almost genuflected at the sight of it.

"You don't see any of these anymore," he said. "And still working fine, all things considered." He talked with her for ten minutes, asking how long she'd had it, where she'd bought it. He listened with genuine interest to how she had ordered it from New York City, how difficult it was to transport, how easy it was to cook for a crowd (twenty-five

one night when George brought home the Intelligence Committee during the war). And not a scratch or ding in it. Still spotless, despite those sloppy nurses.

Lydia runs her hands along the front of the range and squeezes her fingers to turn the knob of the front right burner. She listens patiently for the hiss of the gas. Such a sound, such a whisper really.

"Well, Missy, I don't think it's going be long now. Funny how things work, isn't it? Here I am years younger than your momma, and she's still holding on, mind you, she's only been holding on to the bedposts all these years, but here she is, still among the living, and me, worked every day of my life, raised four children, climbed those stairs to your momma's room, praised the Lord, and I don't think it's going be long now before I join Him. I've kept two houses, two families all these years, my own and your momma's, and I don't mind telling you, sometimes I mix the two of them up. You and that sister Margaret, sometimes when people ask me how many kids I have, I tell them six, does that shock you? I forget you two didn't come from me. You two girls, I mix you two up with all my own. But I don't know, the Lord works in mysterious ways, if I didn't see my arm in front of my face once in a while, I'd forget who we all are. Course I never forget that outside the house, don't you worry about that, but here in the kitchen, with you at the table and your momma upstairs and your



son Greg in the next room, why, I don't even know which house I'm in anymore. Don't you fret about that Eddy now. You make those visits, don't listen to anyone else but your Mamie now; I've talked to the Lord about this, I've seen it before. You just make those visits. He'll know who you are, one day, I just know it, you'll walk down that corridor and into that room, and his eyes will look up, and he'll SEE you. Those are my words. I promise it. You just keep making those visits. And don't you listen to no one else, no matter what they tell you about that stuff. I may be Mamie from the quarter, I may be Mamie the cook and Mamie the housekeeper, I may be old and lowering one foot in the grave, but this I know. You just keep making those visits, girl, I promise your child will come back to you, your firstborn, he'll come awake to you."

Lydia gazes out the window. The wind must be picking up; the colors are twirling now — yellow and orange and red and even white. It's getting colder, too; the sun must be leaving the kitchen. Lydia stands up straight, a look of determination on her face, her bathrobe loose around her pigeon legs, and makes her way slowly, pushing one foot in front of the other, from the kitchen through the hall to the door of the conservatory. Toward the end, George spent every afternoon there, wrapped in a blanket on the lounge, taking his afternoon nap. Lydia paced the house for those two hours like a bird flitting about its nest. When they moved George to the nursing home, Lydia crossed the threshold gingerly. Now she spends every after-

noon there.

Lydia feels the weight of her life lighten when she lifts her foot and steps into this room that is almost, but not quite, out-of-doors. Her left leg wobbles but her smile is steadfast. She lifts the hat and places it on her head, pulling the visor down to shade her eyes from the sunlight. Lydia turns her head to the window and smiles, then moves her hand across the wall to the back of the chaise lounge. She shuffles her feet before her until she can feel the arm of the chaise, then lets herself go, landing on the chaise like a slinky toy, one vertebra at a time.

The floor protects her feet, the ceiling shelters her head, and walls keep the rain and wind from her body, but nothing will keep the light from her eyes. Even now, as the house darkens, Lydia senses the sun in the conservatory. She feels the familiar yellow flow through the windows, wash across the floor, and work its way up the walls.

"Hang on there, Eddy," she whispers. "The water is a bit choppy today, and the sun is blinding. Don't touch that knife, darling, you'll cut yourself. Careful now, there's blood on the bottom of the boat, from all the fish we caught. What good fishermen we are. Mamie will be so pleased.

"It won't be long now. We'll be home soon," Lydia says, as she leans back against the stem of the boat.

