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Leaving Home, Coming Home

by Dorothy Howe Brooks

Louise carried her news like a burden, a wound as deep as childhood, and she wondered as she pulled up to the curb, turned off the engine, what primitive instinct had compelled her to drive the 500 miles from Atlanta to New Orleans when she could just as easily have telephoned. She opened the door and stepped into the damp heat, the air heavy with the sweet, pungent odor of summer afternoons, Kick the Can and Statues. The curbing beside her was crooked and broken, unable to resist the force of the live oak next to the sidewalk, its roots reaching like tendrils, holding fast. The worn knees of the old tree jutting through the dirt, its coarse bark, conjured up images of herself, only a little younger than Allison was now, climbing up to swing from its limbs. She slammed the car door with a certainty she wished she could feel.

The gate squeaked as she pushed it open, its wrought iron shiny with love, the yard barrel larger than Laney's old playpen, carefully planted with azaleas and budding camellias. How protective people were of their tiny spaces, each yard set off with its own white pickets, iron swirls, or wooden privacy fence. She climbed the front steps to the porch, traced the crystal prisms of glass in the door, their beveled edges carving rainbows out of the morning sunlight, and rang the bell.

Her father seemed smaller than she remembered from his last visit, his eyes deeper, shadowed, his back bent slightly in spite of his efforts, the cane taking more of the weight. Standing tall, she could see the top of his head, the scarce hairs combed across to mask the bare shiny center. She greeted him and kissed his cheek, her hands on his shoulders, the close-cut whiskers brushing her lips, the faint odor of English Leather lingering.

They sat in the parlor like guests having tea, and he moved about providing coffee and pieces of warmed-over cake, apologizing for the inept-ness of it, the lack of fine china, the absence of the silver

service. His eyes took in the whole room as he said this, as if to pin down a fleeting spirit he felt somewhere in the house. Louise could sense his apology was not to her but to this unseen presence. Only a year. Such a short time for him. One in 75.

The polished wood floor echoed each movement as she helped herself to sugar, to cream. The sound bounced off the walls, hovered close to the high ceilings. Lace curtains at the windows stirred in the hot breeze, but Louise knew the rule: no air-conditioning until the temperature reached 90. An old pedestal fan whirred gently in the open space before the dining room, its head moving rhythmically side to side, the same fan that had lulled her to sleep as a child on hot nights.

"And Bill?" he said as he leaned forward in his straight-backed chair. "You left him home with the girls?" He raised his cup to his lips to hide his expression, but Louise could read it without seeing, could sense the tension in the words, the unspoken reprimand. "Yes," she said. Nothing more.

She began to talk brightly, without stopping, chattering to fill the empty room. About the girls. Allison in junior high now. You wouldn't know her. Fixes her hair for hours each morning. Admires herself in windowpanes and the door of the microwave. She smiled, sure he must remember: *Louise, get out of that bathroom and come to breakfast.* And Laney. Such a tomboy. Grass stains on her jeans. The soccer team. Made two goals last week. You would have been proud. He glowed, and in the glow Louise saw the basketball gym, the hot afternoons, heard the shouts, the slap of Kedded feet on glossy wood, the damp smell of sweat and rubber. His hand on her shoulder, his disappointment. *They were a good team, Louise. Formidable. Too bad you didn't get to play more.* Yes, he would have been proud.

"Your bags," he said, rising. "Bern wants to see you." He stopped at the door. "Oh, and your



sister called. We're going for dinner." All the messages given, dutifully. The host. Louise watched him as he made his way to the car, one hand on the cane. His stiff frame, still solid, yet beginning to fold in on itself. He knew something was wrong. She could never fool him, not the day she and Beth threw pebbles at passing cars, not the morning she sneaked in at four a.m. There was always the knowing glance over breakfast, the eyes meeting hers, daring her, testing. The thing unspoken between them rising up and dancing on the table next to the cereal bowls. Her little sister, Marge, with her starched white blouse, hair curled into ringlets around her face, gloating. Their mother bustling in the background, her presence softening the moment like a faint brush of pale chalk over a pastel, blending the harsh tones, smoothing the rough edges. *How was your night, dear?* her mother would say, and Louise, subdued, would know she would never again sneak in so late, defy. *Pass the sugar,* was all he would say. No reproach. No forgiveness.

In the back bedroom, Louise hung her two clean shirts in the closet and unpacked the rest of her things. Years ago the twin beds had been rearranged to allow for her mother's sewing machine. Boxes of scraps filled the closet and brightly colored spools of thread adorned the bedside table. She sat on the bed, remembered the gas heater that used to stand in the corner by the door, her father bending to light it each morning as he awakened her, the whoosh the fire made as it caught. Remembered standing in front of it to dress, its heat warming her bare legs. And later. Sharing one of the beds with Bill for as long as they could stand it, Bill whispering remarks about the sleeping arrangements. *Don't they know we're married? Don't they approve of double beds?* And still later, the girls in cribs, or in sleeping bags on the floor between them. She had stayed away this past year to avoid such sights as these. She picked up the phone and called Beth.

* * * *

Louise left her car parked at the curb and walked the six blocks to Beth's house, the same one Beth had lived in as a girl. Shrubs lined the walk, taller, thicker than before, but the same almost invisible thorns, the same pale berries. She avoided cracks in the pavement, hurried past the dark mansion on the corner, careful not to peer in the gate. Only a year. But she had never before returned without the baggage of husband and children, the noise and distraction they carried in their wake. She felt naked in the hot September sunlight, and chilled in spite of the heat. She turned up the walk to Beth's house.

Beth answered the bell with the same broad smile her mother had years ago. Her cheeks, rosy in the sunlight, touched Louise's as they hugged, a long embrace. Louise felt the full flesh of her friend's shoulders, smelled the just-washed freshness of her hair, noticed the way she patted Louise's back then stood apart, holding Louise at arm's length to inspect her. A mother, as surely is if she had toddlers clinging to her legs and a baby in her arms. Her children may be almost grown, but they had left their mark on Beth.

They sat at the kitchen counter as Beth fixed them decorative plates of tuna salad, curled carrot pieces, bright tomato, and deviled eggs. Louise stirred her tea, ice clinking against the glass. The white tile was new. The openness to the den, to the back porch. The skylight. Even the counter with the stools pulled up to it was a recent addition. But there was a familiar feel that Louise couldn't quite place, that she supposed this house would always hold: the fig tree in the backyard, larger, but still looming over the garage; the two neat lanes of concrete leading to the rear.

"So what's wrong?"

Louise, startled, put down her glass and turned aside. Beth knew. Suddenly Louise felt an aching tiredness come over her, all the efforts of the past weeks and months peeling away.

"It's Bill, isn't it?" Beth's voice was gentle, and when Louise nodded, she added, "I knew it. I



knew it was something for you to come alone.”

Louise could feel the tears start. The house, the round face of her friend, the shared secret, secret no longer. . . . But she caught herself, laughed. “Would you look at me. I guess I haven’t had time to let it sink in. I haven’t told anyone here. Haven’t even said it out loud: Bill and I are getting a divorce. There. I’ve said it. Bill and I are getting a divorce. That wasn’t so hard.” She searched her friend’s face for encouragement.

“I’m sorry,” Beth said, but she was looking away, over Louise’s shoulder, like she was afraid to acknowledge this news. Just a quick moment, then she turned her eyes back to her friend, that characteristic gentleness in her face. “You want to talk about it?”

All of a sudden it seemed there was too much to say, and nothing to say.

“I’m not sure where to begin. It’s all so hard to believe, especially down here for some reason.” Louise could feel Beth’s eyes on her, waiting.

“It was his drinking,” she said, finally. “He ruined it all with his drinking and then he refused to even talk about it. Said he wasn’t an alcoholic. That he was in control. Bullshit.” She took a deep breath and studied the food on her plate, her appetite now gone.

“You think Bill’s an alcoholic?” The way Beth said the word, *alcoholic*, with distaste as well as disbelief, surprised Louise, and she answered quickly, an edge to her voice.

“Who knows? I know he drinks too much. I know he’s impossible to be with when he’s drunk. Who cares what you call it.”

Beth said nothing, looked away.

Louise watched her, waiting. Finally she said, “You don’t have any idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

Beth moved uneasily in her chair. “I know Bill’s always liked to drink. But he loves you, loves the girls. . . .” Her voice went up at the end, like a question.

“Not enough, apparently.” Louise could taste

the bitterness in her voice. “I just wanted him to get help. I even gave him the name of someone. Actually that’s what did it. That’s when he exploded and I finally said he had to get help or get out. That I couldn’t take it anymore. I was firm for once. I thought if he saw I meant it he’d do it for me, for us. But he just packed his things.” She remembered Bill that day, the way he left the room, the sound of his footsteps on the stairs, the dresser drawers being slammed shut, coming down with the suitcase packed, silent, not a word as he got his keys and walked out the back door. “I never dreamed he’d really leave.” She felt like she was talking to herself, caught up in the image of Bill walking out the door, the sound of the car starting, the growing awareness she had had then that this was different, this time there was no going back. “I thought he loved us more than that.”

Louise could feel the stinging tears begin again. “God.” She slammed her fist on the counter. “How could he just throw it all away? All we had. It makes me so angry.”

She stood up and went to the bathroom to find a Kleenex. She blew her nose and wiped her face. “Anyway. It’s done. Easy as that. Fifteen years down the drain.” She laughed, a quick, sarcastic laugh. “So what’s new with you?”

She sat back down across from Beth, stirred her tea, took a big swallow.

“What about the girls?” Beth said. “I mean. Bill was always a good father.”

Of course Beth would think of the girls. She really didn’t understand. Louise looked at her friend and spoke quietly but firmly. “The three weeks since he’s been gone are the first peaceful weeks they’ve had in years. They can actually get their homework done and get to bed without having to listen to their parents yelling at each other downstairs.”

Outside, a car pulled into the drive next door and two teenaged boys got out, slamming doors and calling to each other. In the distance, a lawn mower hummed. Louise softened. “You’re right.



Bill was, *is*, a good father. He'll still be their father, maybe even better without me around."

She picked up a piece of French bread, buttered it, then studied it, put it back on her plate. "I feel like such a failure," she said. "I don't know what I'm doing here. I don't know what to tell Dad." She played with a curled carrot piece, moving it around on her plate, feeling its smooth edges. "I thought I should break the news in person. You know how much Bill meant to Dad."

Beth nodded. "I remember how your dad was always asking Bill's advice on the stock market."

"Yes, and getting him to help with the leaky faucets. I think Dad plans to leave all his tools to Bill. Today he said, 'The girls home with Bill?'—fishing, I know. Waiting for me to say. And I couldn't. Had a speech all prepared. Practiced it all the way down in the car. Out loud."

Louise laughed, suddenly fifteen again, in the back seat of Beth's car, making up a speech for a contest at school that morning. "Remember?" she said, and the memory, whole and intact, lit up in her friend's eyes. Beth giggled, then laughed out loud, as each of them contributed details the other had forgotten.

Louise found it impossible to believe so many years had passed. "How old were we?" she said. "Ninth grade? Tenth?"

"It was before I started dating Terry, and that was tenth grade."

"You and Terry. Has it been that long?"

"Twenty-seven years last May." Beth smiled. "All my life."

Louise looked away. She felt remote, distant, as if she didn't belong here. As if she never belonged here.

"Twenty-seven years. That's a long time."

* * * *

"Thanks," Louise said later, as they embraced. She held Beth's hands in hers. "For everything."

"You know if you ever need anything, I'm here."

Louise waved good-bye and walked down the

front steps, past the concrete stoops on either side. She kept her eyes straight ahead, ignoring the presence of two little-girl ghosts side by side on the stoop, knees raised to their chins, arms around their legs, dreaming little-girl dreams. Mocking her.

She couldn't go home yet. She wasn't ready. She began walking in the other direction and soon found herself around the corner from her sister's house. She decided to stop in and say hello.

Marge greeted her from the kitchen where she was putting the finishing touches on a casserole for their dinner. Perky, Louise thought. All-American. Marge would always be young, though only three years separated them. And successful. As a child, Marge always managed to excel, and now: her kids, clean-cut, honor roll students, good kids. Henry, taking over his dad's business and doing better than anyone predicted. And Marge, selling houses to put the kids through college. Louise shrank into a chair at the kitchen table.

"There." Marge poured them each a cup of coffee and settled in across from Louise. "How've you been? What's the occasion?"

Louise carefully spooned some sugar into her coffee. She stirred, slowly, thoughtfully. Finally, she raised her head.

"It's Bill" she said. "We're splitting up."

A change came over Marge. Her shoulders sagged, her face lost some of its brightness. It was a look their mother used to give as she opened her arms to a crying child. A look that showed more pity than understanding, almost a frown. Louise had never seen her sister resemble their mother so, and she found it disconcerting.

"I'm sorry," Marge said. "I had no idea."

"I guess I hid things better than I thought." She repeated the story she had told Beth. The words came easier this time. She was practicing, she thought. "I haven't told Dad yet. I can't seem to get it out."

Marge shook her head. "He won't be happy." She sounded like a mother scolding her child. Like their mother, saying to Louise, *Wait till your fa-*



ther sees this, or What will your father say? Louise stiffened, but said nothing.

Marge studied the coffee in her cup. "Poor Dad. And after Mother." She looked at her sister. "Do you know he still won't talk about her. Goes about his business as if she had gone away on a trip or something. I don't think he's even cried."

"I'd believe that. I've never seen him cry at all. Even at the funeral. Don't you remember? How everyone said how well he was taking it? I was torn up inside watching him."

"He sticks to his routine. Still walks a mile each morning, even with the cane. Says the cane is just for show, but he needs it more and more. Has lunch with the men from the office on Tuesdays. Naps every afternoon."

"He still won't turn on the air conditioner, I noticed."

Marge laughed. "And only one light at a time. Wait till you see the house at night. It's spooky."

"And I bet he still showers 'Navy style.' Remember?"

"Of course. Making us turn the water off while we washed. How could I forget?"

Louise rested her chin in her hands, her eyes bright. "When I had my first apartment, I used to run hot baths up to the rim of the tub and leave every light in the place on all day. But I think I was doing it for spite. I still felt guilty."

Marge put her cup in the saucer and smiled at Louise, that same gloating smile she had as a child. "You always did."

"Well, you were always Miss Perfect. Never needed to feel guilty." Louise was surprised at the sudden anger in her voice.

"You know that's not fair." Marge's tone was harsh, maybe even a little hurt.

Louise was sorry she had spoken. She stared at the tray of flowers in the center of the table, fresh camellias from the garden, lush pinks and reds, a perfect accent to the forest green tablecloth. "Sometimes I think marrying Bill was the only right thing I ever did," she said at last. "In his eyes,

at least. It kind of made up for all the rest."

"That's crazy," said Marge, too quickly.

But Louise wasn't convinced. She had never said it out loud, never admitted it even to herself, but the thought had existed below the surface for a long time, a vague uneasy feeling. She felt a sense of relief in the silence that followed.

"I'd better be off," she said, and rose to go.

* * * *

Back at home, she found her father in the parlor, fixing his evening cocktail.

"Come join me," he called to her.

Louise went in, poured herself a plain tonic and sat across from him. The silence filled the room. All her life, her father was a figure at the edges of the conversation. Her mother supplied the words, the constant stream of topics, and her father sat on the sidelines, interested, but saying little. Now, without her mother, Louise found herself searching for words to fill the space.

And besides. Bill was there between them.

She chatted about Bern, Marge, her day, as best she could. Then the silence took over again, only the hum of the fan in the corner, a mockingbird outside the window.

"How's Bill?" he said, knowing, or not knowing, Louise couldn't be sure.

So this was it. This was the time to talk.

"Dad," Louise began, searching his face for clues. "Bill and I are getting a divorce." There. It was out.

Her father said nothing. Kept his eyes on her face, a stoic expression on his. He stirred his drink, took a sip.

"Bill left you?" he said finally, in disbelief.

"Not exactly. I made him leave." Still no response, no frown, no smile, nothing. "I had to. It was his drinking." Louise fidgeted, smoothed the arm of the sofa, examined a pillow. "It had really gotten out of hand." She felt compelled to continue, to convince him. "Some nights he wouldn't come home at all. I'd sit by the phone, worried sick. The kids knew. I couldn't let them grow up



in a house like that. Not any more.”

Still he said nothing. Sipped his drink. Watched her.

“I tried everything.” Louise’s voice was getting higher. She was talking fast. “Finally I told him he had to get help or leave.” Then, feeling his judgment. “I had no choice. You have no idea how bad it was.”

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Man’s got to have his drink now and then. You can’t take that away from him. Bill’s a salesman. He needs to make contacts. Keep friendly. What’s a drink now and then among friends?”

Louise paused. “This was different. Dad,” she said, emphasizing each word, trying to get back in control. In her mind she heard Bill saying almost the same words, but loud, shouting them. *You don’t understand, he would say. I’ve got to meet people. You like the money but you won’t let me do what it takes. And worse: You think it’s so easy? You should try and support us sometime. See how it is. And even worse: If you didn’t nag at me all the time I wouldn’t drink so much.*

The silence in the room was bearing down on her. She was hot. The fan in the corner was the only sound, a low hum, as it brought its saving breeze, then turned away. “It was awful for the girls,” she said quietly. “He’d get so angry around the house, yelling at them. Once he threw a glass at the wall.”

Her father uncrossed his legs, placed both feet on the floor in front of him and stared at them. “Your mother would never have left,” he said firmly. “She would have found a way.”

Louise could feel the anger rise up inside her. Her hands gripped the arm of the sofa. She faced him, eyes glaring. “Well, Mother’s gone,” she said, her voice loud and suddenly strong. “I had to do it my way.”

She stood up, marched down the hall and into the bathroom. She shouldn’t have come. They would never understand, not her father, not Marge. Not even Beth. There was nothing here for her,

not any more. She turned on the light, ran some cold water over her hands and splashed it onto her face, then reached for the linen hand towel hanging beside the sink. It was pale yellow, spotted with age, a single flower in the center outlined in tiny, uneven stitches. Chain-stitching, or was it feather-stitching? She never could get the names straight. There in the corner were her initials in faded blue. A long-ago Christmas gift to her mother, one that she herself had hand-embroidered. She hadn’t seen it in years. She ran her hands over the worn, child-sized stitches. Her father must have found it in among her mother’s things and laid it out in honor of her visit.

She could hear her father now moving about in the kitchen. She carefully patted her face dry then refolded the towel, hung it up and went to find him. He was rinsing glasses, carefully leaning to load them in the dishwasher. He moved slowly, inspecting each glass before placing it on the rack.

“We’d better hurry,” he said as he heard her enter, his back to her. “We’re due at Marge’s in ten minutes.” She walked over and stood beside him at the sink. Beyond their kitchen was a narrow alley and the shuttered windows of the house next door.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I know how much you loved Bill.”

He rinsed another glass, then turned off the water.

“I guess I wanted you to understand,” she said.

He turned to her, holding the damp glass in one hand. “Thank you for coming.” He put the glass on the counter and stared at it. “Sometimes I think I’ve lived too long,” he said, more to himself than to Louise. “Your mother . . .” His voice cracked and he drew in a breath, finishing almost in a whisper. “Your mother would have known what to say.”

Louise put her arm around his back, felt the bony shoulders through his thin shirt. “You miss her, I know.”

He faced the sink again and shut his eyes. “Ev-



ery day," he said softly, like a sigh.

She held him loosely, tentatively at first, then his body shook with a thinly concealed sob and she pressed him close, felt her own tears begin. He reached up, took her hand and squeezed it gently. Then he cleared his throat, placed the last glass on the rack in the dishwasher and turned to her, his

face now composed. "Is there anything you need? Money? A place to stay?"

She wiped her eyes with the back other hand and smiled. "I'm fine, Dad."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. Yes, I'm sure."

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