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Suzanne Thomson

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# Good Friday

by Suzanne Thomson

*And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."*

The enormity of everything crowded in on Zach: the dinner the University President had just hosted to welcome him, their new faculty member, the astonishingly bright stars which pulled his gaze heavenward as he stepped into the night air, and the belly on his wife Beth, which recaptured his dutiful attention, as the President's wife took her hand at the door, and murmured, "If there's anything we can do..."

They walked with well-fed contentment down the dirt road which meandered by the President's house to the small campus, and then to their home. After a few minutes of blissful silence, Beth took up the conversation they had left off before the dinner.

"OK, so why did they all end up here?" she asked. They stepped with extra care on the dark, uneven sidewalk, which the old elm trees had pushed and puckered into treacherous cracks.

"Look at Paul. He got his PhD from Yale. Old Testament."

"So did Marjorie," said Zach.

"Which one is she?"

"Philosophy teacher,  
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married to that quiet guy, who sat in the corner all night, under the bonsai tree."

"The one with cowboy boots," Beth mused. "No, I know what the real reason is. They couldn't hack it in the fast lane, and they ended up in this little Oklahoma backwater, and they like being big fish in a little pond so much, they don't want to move. You see? They'd never get so much respect in a larger college."

Was Beth including him in this assessment? Or speaking on his behalf as an observer who was just passing through, en route to something loftier? Zach glanced at his wife, suspicious, but not able to believe she had it in her to insult him. Beth was between the glowing flush of pregnancy, which lit up her narrow face with a beauty hitherto disguised, and the inward-turned discomfort of the last few weeks, which threatened to undo the fragile brush of nature's reprieve.

They came to a crossroad. Zach held Beth's arm as she stepped off the curb and started across. An elderly man Zach recognized from the neighborhood was walking his

wife's dog - a nervous miniature schnauzer which had woken them up on occasion.

"Evening, folks," the old man said.

"Hey, Elmer," said Zach. "Nice night, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." To their dismay, Elmer stopped. He could weave a net of chatter from which it was difficult to escape. "Have you all settled in? How are you liking Enid?"

They had been asked this same question about twelve times already that evening at the faculty dinner. Zach did not really know how he felt. It was too soon. But Beth was under no illusions.

"It's a change from Philadelphia, shall we say?" she said. "Different."

"Elmer," said Zach, to get them off the contentious subject. "Who lives in the house two doors down from us? That one." He pointed across the small park.

Elmer, guileless, followed his gaze and considered for a moment. "Oh, that's old Jake Bullock. You know, he raised oxen, a long time ago. That's kinda unusual around here. Used them in historic parades, to pull covered

wagons, that kinda thing. Maybe, with a name like his, it was destiny."

Zach watched the small dog tangle the lead around Elmer's legs again. Then it stopped, clipped ears at attention, looking with rigid concentration towards Bullock's house. Beth gasped.

"What is it?" Zach took

grandkids, they live in California. Stockton. We see them maybe once a year, if we're lucky."

"A sign of the times, I'm afraid," said Zach.

Beth moved away.

"Thank your wife for the blueberry pie. It was delicious."

Zach stepped after her.

"Night," he called to Elmer.

Elmer's voice followed

## "Ella, the priest can't save your grandfather's life, but the doctors might."

her arm.

"The baby; it just turned completely over."

Zach was about to ask if she was all right, though he wasn't sure if that was appropriate, and if it wasn't, if he was supposed to coo with delight instead of concern, Beth would give him a well practiced look of withering scorn. But then the front door he had just pointed out opened. A girl stepped out of Bullock's house. The light from the room behind framed her slender body. The door shut, and she almost disappeared in the darkness. They could see her dark form moving like a wraith across the old man's unkempt lawn.

"That's Ella, his granddaughter," Elmer said. "She comes in every day to look after him."

"We wondered who she was," said Zach.

"He's a tough old farmer. Widowed. Won't go to the nursing home for nothing." Elmer chirped to his dog, then sighed. "I swear, she's an angel. Sweet as they come. Not like most kids these days. Now, my

them. "If you folks need any help, or anything, just give us a holler!"

They were in the little park now, almost home.

"I can't believe we are living in the middle of wheat fields and cows. I mean, if you want to do a simple thing, like go for a walk away from houses and people, you can't. It's a cultural desert."

"It's only for a year, Beth. You can survive that long."

"Zach, why is a year a

## "A sign of the times, I'm afraid,"

magic time? And how can you not be pissed off when you can't even teach your own subject? And speaking of that, I just don't think, from what I hear, Zach, that a man is going to get a decent position in Latin American studies, when there are plenty of bright women and minorities applying, who have spent years doing research there."

She never called him by his name as much as when arguing.

"Will you slow down? I can't understand you. For God

sakes, I have to go where there's a position. I thought you liked the idea of not having to work when the baby comes. I thought you liked being able to rent a house on my measly salary, instead of huddling in a tiny apartment, and commuting two hours every day. Is that what you want to go back to?"

A figure stepped in front of them. Zach caught his breath in surprise. It was the girl from Jake Bullock's house.

"Hi," she said in a soft voice. "I'm glad you're home. Can I use your phone?"

The girl was slender and delicate. She was dressed in blue jeans and a white sweatshirt. She seemed almost ethereal, elusive, next to his substantial wife. Startled out of his anger, Zach fought down the impulse to touch the abundant waves of her light hair.

"Sure," Zach said. He led the way up the drive and unlocked the front door, then stepped back to let the girl enter. Beth followed her, brushing past him, to take

charge.

"The phone's over here," she said, and pointed to the kitchen door. "Doesn't your grandfather have a phone? We just saw you leave his house."

"Oh, no." The girl seemed amused by the idea. She went into the kitchen.

"You're Ella, right?" Beth said, standing at the kitchen door. "I'm Beth, and this is Zach."

Ella smiled. "I know," she said. There was no pretense in her words, but from the way

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Beth frowned, Zach could see that she was stung. She shrugged and went back into the living room to take her coat off. Zach moved to help her, when they heard the girl's words.

"Yes, I need to talk to Father McMann. I know it's late, I'm sorry, Sister. Yes, this is Gabriella."

Beth and Zach looked at each other. "Father McMann?" said Beth.

silence. "I'm sorry. I don't make the connection," said Zach. "Shall I call an ambulance?"

"No, that's OK, the priest is coming."

"Ella, the priest can't save your grandfather's life, but the doctors might." Beth moved towards the phone.

"No, please, you don't understand. He wants to die in his home, quietly."

door frame. The front of her sweatshirt had 'Carpe Deum' written in large blue letters over her small breasts. Zach blinked through his wire-rim glasses, and read it again. Wasn't it supposed to be 'diem'?

"Please," she said. "You don't understand. If you wait until Father McMann gets here, he'll explain."

Zach could not believe the girl was blocking his way.

Her voice and expression were soft and beautifully enticing, but her body immovable. He would actually have to pick her up

## "Shouldn't you be walking around when the contractions come?"

"Must be a pocket of Polish settles or something," Zach said.

"Father," said Ella. "Yes, it's happened. I'm pretty sure he'll die tonight. Thank you. I'll be there. 'Bye.'"

A suspicion began to grow in Zach, which deepened when Ella came back into the living room and smiled at them. Neither the smile nor her dark eyes held any expression he was familiar with. Was it possible that she was mentally unbalanced? In the light her blonde hair was a golden halo framing her striking features. Her face was just long enough, her nose and lips pronounced enough, that she could have as easily been a boy. She looked about sixteen years old, but it was difficult to tell.

Zach bent over slightly, not sure how to address her in his revelation of her mental state, and said, "Did we just hear you tell someone that your grandfather is dying?"

"Yes," said Ella. "This is Good Friday."

There was a moment of WESTVIEW, WINTER 1992

"Ella," Zach explained. "Nobody wants to die, quietly or not, and he might be in a great deal of pain, which the hospital can ease."

Beth gasped. "Oh, there, it did it again!" Her hands moved over her stomach.

"What, what?" demanded Zach.

She took his hand and placed it on the hard lump of the baby's head. It moved again.

"Doesn't that hurt?" asked Zach.

For a second they had forgotten about Ella. Her words again brought them up short. "Wouldn't it be nice if the baby was born when my Grandfather died?"

"Why would that be nice, Ella?" Zach said.

"Well, you know, there's such a big gap when somebody dies, all of a sudden, and a new baby would fill it up again."

"You seem to be a very unusual person, Ella. Now, I really think I ought to call an ambulance." He moved to the kitchen door. Ella stood in his way, arms and legs braced in the

or push her out of the way in order to reach the phone. He was at a complete loss.

"Ella," he began, but another gasp from Beth turned his attention again. She was looking down at her feet. A dark stain was growing on the carpet.

"My water. It's broken."

"But it's not time yet," said Zach.

"Tell the baby that!" Beth's eyes glazed over. "The labor's starting! Oh!"

Zach helped Beth to the bedroom. He eased her down on the bed, but she stood up and told him to put a towel down so she wouldn't stain the blankets. Zach couldn't see how that would help, but he did as she asked, then hovered over his groaning wife, wringing his hands. He was baffled. Was she in real pain, or not? She lay and writhed, then sat up and asked him, in clear, uninhabited speech, to phone the hospital, then, as if remembering, lay back down and gasped some more.

"Shouldn't you be walking around when the contractions come?" he asked,

but she sent him off to get a glass of water. As he scuttled down the hall he saw Ella slip out the front door. Well, he could only do one thing at a time, and duty to his family came first.

Half an hour later Zach stood at the front window. The hospital had suggested they bring Beth in—no rush, but as soon as they could get her things together. The labor would probably take a while, you never knew with the first baby, but since the water had broken, they needed her to be there, just in case of infection.

Two doors down, an unfamiliar car was in the drive. After a moment's absent-minded thought, he guessed it must be this Father McMann's car. Unease assailed him, but he dismissed it. It was not his business.

Another car drove up, and two figures got out. They looked as if they were going to a costume party, until Zach realized they were nuns. These must be the old-fashioned habits, with wimple and veil, and full-length skirt. Surely nobody wore them anymore. The western world had received enlightenment four centuries ago. How could people cling to these archaic, superstitious beliefs? The nuns flowed up the path to Bullock's front door. Zach glimpsed the flash of a heel as they entered the house. The women were barefoot.

"For God sakes, Zach. Rub my back! Is the car out of the garage? Oh, God. What if the baby comes right now? Zach? Zach!"

The car. "I'll be right back," he called, and bolted out to the garage. He bent over to lift the heavy garage door, and pulled. It came up with

reluctance. A stabbing pain shot down his back. He gasped and fell across the car's trunk. His glasses fell, bounced off the bumper, and shattered on the floor. The pain clamped down like teeth springing shut. If he moved, it would surely overwhelm him, and he might lose consciousness.

"Oh, God," he said.  
"Not now." As he rested on the cold metal, his breath misting

the metallic blue under his mouth, he heard a sound. He stopped breathing and listened. It was a chant. Voices were rising and falling in an ancient litany. It sounded as if a choir were singing in the distance, but Zach had seen only two women going into Bullock's house. It was impossible. But what beautiful music. He listened. He had no choice. The voices surrounded him, lifted him in a soothing caress. It was as if he were a child again, and his mother's cool hand was moving over his forehead, and under her caress there was nothing in the world that could trouble him. He had forgotten that mother long ago. How could he have forgotten? The warmth of her bosom, the delicate scent of her, the love she enveloped him with; how keenly he felt it now, and how empty his loss in the years between. The burdens of responsibility he had taken up since then, a lifetime past, seemed a dreadful mistake; a choosing of the wrong road, which led only to heavier burdens and alienation from some vital link he had forgotten.

"Mom," Zach whispered.  
"I'm sorry, Mom! Ah, God." Under his eyes little rivulets of tears made curious patterns through the condensation on

the car.

And then Beth was there, holding her suitcase, gasping. She waddled over.

"What the hell are you doing? You left forty minutes ago. I don't believe this. I thought you'd forgotten to take me. Have you lost it completely, Zach? Come on!" She got into the front seat. Zach tried to move, and found he could, if he concentrated and went slowly. The sweat ran off his forehead, but he managed to ease himself down behind the steering wheel. As his foot depressed the clutch peddle, he cried out, but Beth was in her own trance, and didn't notice.

They backed out, leaving the garage door open. As they drove past Jake Bullock's house, both groaning and hissing with pain, Zach noticed again how the stars blazed, even with the pregnant moon at her zenith. There were flowers everywhere, in all the front lawns, in the parks they passed, standing out in the moonlight like little dim beacons, void of color in the night, but full of promise for the morning. ■

*(Suzanne Thomson lives in Enid, Oklahoma. Her work has appeared in Byline Magazine, The Anglican Theological Review, and elsewhere.)*