

A Breath Away

by

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We needed green stain for the kitchen cabinets, another self-help project, so on my way home from work, if you can call what I do work, answering the phone for an insurance agency, I went by Baer's Hardware. I say we needed the green stain when the truth was that I needed to do something, anything, and the kitchen was as good a place as any for me to offer myself some help.

I am living alone as I have been for fifteen years, but I still think as a we, that Harry still lives at home with me, that we are married in the ordinary sense of things. Our kitchen cabinets would be so much better green, everything would seem better with a green kitchen. That's how I was thinking.

I write my return address on letters and bills as Mrs. Harry W. Lassiter, not Ms. Joyce M. Lassiter, and I never will. I know what people say about Harry and me, that I am in denial and that Harry has lost his mind and thinks with his penis. I agree somewhat with the Harry part but not the part about me. I know how much I can stand, and I feel that every test makes me stronger. The Lord does not give us more than we can stand, though sometimes I think He underestimates the weight of things we bear—like when I almost signed the divorce papers when Harry came crying to me, saying that Estelle had accused him of poisoning her. You should have done just that, I said to him as he sat at our kitchen table, his head down, crying like a baby. He pretended he didn't hear me and said that our divorce was the only thing that would help him. Then he went on with the

poisoning story. The sheriff, our old friend, Wayne, had been smiling, Harry said, and had only come out to Harry's when Estelle called him because he was worried that Estelle might hurt Harry. But Wayne's smiling in his uniform only made Estelle madder, so mad she ran out of the house and took herself and their baby, who, poor thing, has turned out to be retarded—we can tell now that Malcolm is five—to a shelter for abused women. Somehow I held out, and I kissed Harry and told him I could not give him a divorce, a divorce was not what he needed. He needed to come back home. I added that he would never get a divorce from me.

Baer's Hardware had the green stain I needed. The old fashioned store was in its last stages of life because the Wal*Mart Super Center had moved just outside Monetta twelve years ago. When I walked in, Len, at the counter in a big black cowboy hat, caught me in his wide-lens salesman's smile, bringing me closer to him. Why he wasn't embarrassed by the hat I should have guessed, and it made a kind of sense after we got through talking about what paint or stain would cover the layers of grease and Liquid Gold and Murphy Oil buildup on my cabinets.

The hat was my problem, not his. I had come that far in my own kind of therapy: the way I see the world is my way/my world. The world wobbles and shifts depending on who's doing the seeing or talking. This is a very old insight that I am just now getting my head around, as our daughters say to me.

Len's wife, Jeanne, had been dead a year this past December 2nd, he told me when we were a few minutes past talking about staining the cabinets. It turned out that I had known Jeanne years ago, and, in fact, I had heard that Jeanne had died but had forgotten. She had been such a pretty girl, the prettiest in our high school class. Len nodded mildly

at my attempts at belated sympathy, taking them for what they were worth. Then he began his story, even though I could tell he wished I were a better person to hear it. It registered that he had not gotten a note or even a sympathy card from a Mrs. Harry Lassiter. His Christianity impelled him to forgive me and to reach out to me, so I had to stand there and be forgiven and reached. It wasn't as bad as it sounds.

He could settle the problem of my cabinets. He had just the thing: Greased Lightning, he said without a smile. The cabinets needed some of that product before they could be stained, even with the deep poison green I thought would hide all the streaks and scars.

That out of the way, he started his story. The day Jeanne died they had made cookies all day for the nursing home people they knew. In the afternoon, Jeanne had sat down and said, "Len, I feel a little pain, right here."

Len pointed to his chest and explained to me, "Her heart. She felt a little pain in her heart. That's all she said. 'A little pain,' and then she was gone."

"I am so sorry." I repeated it twice, but sorrow like the cowboy hat was my problem. He was the one who had dealt with losing Jeanne and had put it if not behind him, then where it belonged and could be useful not only to himself but to others. Useful to me, this woman who thinks what she needs is green stain. I could see him thinking this about me. He had been heartbroken since that moment two years ago when Jeanne had felt her little pain, but he had drawn a Christian message from the sad story and would be glad to draw it for me. I dreaded the message coming from this Lash LaRue-Tex Ritter-Roy Rogers in a black hat behind the counter the way I dread anyone who tries to tell me

something for my own good, like get rid of Harry, or asks me how long it's going to take me to wake up.

“We are only a breath away, you know. But, the good news is that Jeanne is,” at this point, he pointed with his heart finger to the heating ducts in the store, “waiting for us up there, waiting for that happy time when we will join her and be together forever.”

He seemed aware that his last two words rhymed as if he were performing a country song, and of course he had told this story, sung this song many times in the last two years. In fact, he was saying, he had written Jeanne's story into a song and performed it at the nursing home and at church suppers around town. He was honoring me, he said sweetly, by telling me his story and about his plan to reunite with Jeanne. He had faith that the story would be useful to me, maybe not in ways I could see at first, or ever. I might not remember that Jeanne had the shiniest brown hair to go with her shiny brown eyes. I said I did and added that the girls had all been a little jealous. He nodded: of course we had been.

Years ago, when she had come to my high school as a senior, Jeanne had been pretty, very pretty, so pretty that one long-time teacher's marriage had almost hit the rocks, and one of the coaches almost got divorced from his wife for making a fool of himself over a girl who was not doing anything but being seventeen, throwing her whole self into a laugh, twirling around corners instead of just walking, making it the fashion to roll up the cuffs of her short-sleeved blouses and put the back of her collar up like the boys did. Turning herself and flipping her hair a lot for all to admire.

The coach's wife had told her friends, who told me years later, that Jeanne, “that little piece,” had brought them “to the brink,” and that she had been just a hair away from

leaving. One night the coach's wife had packed up the children and put them in the car, and there they sat in the cold out in the yard for three hours. She had made sandwiches and taken a thermos of hot chocolate and chips so the kids thought they were going on a long trip. She had games for them to play and she read to them. She gave the coach until five o'clock—it was around two when she got everything in the car—to set things straight with Jeanne, whatever that meant. It was late November, raining, dark, Christmas was coming, she even had the turkey and ham in the freezer, but she was ready to leave if he didn't get rid of Jeanne to whatever degree they were involved. At four-fifty-two, she said the coach (she called him Coach evidently) got it straight and came out to the car and told them to come back in the house. The children did not seem to mind sitting out in the car and having a picnic in the cold. They must have been the true children of a coach, tough, obedient, careless of discomfort and arbitrary rules and defensive strategies. She had kept starting the engine to run the heater.

Jeanne did not go to college, didn't need to go because she was so pretty. Being almost pretty, I went two years. I had not seen Jeanne or heard how her life turned out, and I was surprised that Jeanne's widower was this mild man who worked in her parents' hardware store and wore a cowboy hat, a man who was not flustered that she had been just a breath away from eternity as she baked cookies for the nursing home. That's what we all are, he repeated, whether we know it or not.

Later, the Greased Lightening and the green stain turned out to be wrong, the cabinets needed to have polyurethane to finish them off and give them a little glow. When I went back to Baer's, Len said he thought that I knew that. "Everyone knows about polyurethane." I got an apology from him—he smiled and said he certainly should

have told me, but he repeated that he thought I would know that cabinets needed those finishing coats, the protection factor. Then he launched into another story from his life with Jeanne.

It was a set-up, a trap to get a listener. I might as well have been one of the nursing home people, parked in a wheel chair, listening to his songs and story about Jeanne. I was sure that he had failed to remind me about the polyurethane for the cabinets so I would have to come back to the store, and then he could tell me another chapter in his book of love. He actually used that old song title.

Like everyone, he began, Jeanne had been under a lot of stress, so it was not really hard to believe when he looked back on it that she had had that little pain in her heart and had gone so quickly. She had a heart murmur, and yes, of course, they knew about it. She had arrhythmia. They knew that all along.

I wanted to yell into his sweet smile that some of us have a big pain there where he kept pointing to, just to the left of his bola tie. I wanted to tell him that Harry, who hasn't lived at home for almost fifteen years, is—there is no other word for it—dating me. Not that we are going steady. He came by last week, Tuesday, stood outside talking about his radiation treatments, and when he was getting in his truck to leave, he said “You know, Joyce, I love you.” Fool that I am, I murmured, just as if we were on a date and just as if he had not been heading back to Estelle and the house they have been living in for fifteen years with their retarded boy, Malcolm, “I know, Harry.” Just as if I haven't heard through the grapevine that Harry brags that Estelle has the flattest stomach in the state of Virginia. And he and I both know that when he was a boy, he said he couldn't date me because I wasn't pretty enough. I guess he changed his mind, and then changed it

back, and now, I guess I am pretty enough to date anyway. I always put on lipstick in the morning and an ironed blouse. It's old fashioned, but it's me.

What could Mr. Christian Cowboy say to the level of stress I live under?

But this chapter of his Jeanne story was called "Embezzlement." He himself called it "this chapter" and began. Jeanne had suspected something for years about the store and had laid a trap in the paper work—which means, he explained, computer files these days—and caught their old friend, Laura Norris, red-handed, changing the amounts on the bank deposits and pocketing the difference. Over the years, Laura had done very well with this extra income. She had put that new kind of siding on her house, replaced the carpeting and wiring, put in a new heat pump, paid off her credit cards, and gotten a new Taurus. At first, Jeanne had blamed the Wal*Mart Super Center for the slow drain on Baer's, but when she had studied the computer files, she could see what had happened, brilliantly done with no discernable pattern of discrepancy, a different amount every month, and not every month. Not discernable to anyone else, Len said sadly and proudly, until Jeanne put her mind to it and came to the terrible conclusion that it was Laura who was stealing from Baer's. It had been too much, and it had killed Jeanne.

Now Laura Norris was serving a nine-year sentence for almost ruining Baer's Hardware, but not for the real crime of murder. She had been much worse than the Wal*Mart for all of them. A murderer.

"You could say that Laura Norris killed my Jeanne. In fact, I do say it. Rather, I sing it in my songs."

I agreed with Len. I could see where he was coming from. I could say that Estelle was killing me slowly, like the embezzler, Laura Norris, had killed Len's Jeanne. I don't

blame Harry like people think I should. I blame Estelle. I am familiar with the killer, much more familiar with her than Jeanne was with Laura Norris. Some people would say that I am dating my killer but I don't. They tell me about women who are killed by their boyfriends and husbands. Those are their favorite television shows.

But I have loved Harry since I first saw him, and I have been married to him for forty-three years, if you count all the years and not just the ones that he lived at home. We have two almost perfect children, a nice brick ranch house, and an asphalt driveway up to the two-car garage, a life that is the same life we used to live in many ways, except now he lives with Estelle and dates me. He used to live with me and date Estelle, a traditional adultery. No one understands this new dating, but everyone is used to it. Even Estelle, I hear, has stopped having fits that send her to the emergency room with panic attacks and migraines, which I hear from Harry are so bad they come close to setting off mini-strokes. I tell Harry that I have had shingles twice because of our situation. He wants my sympathy for Estelle's visits to the emergency room, but he thinks that I can deal with shingles and anything else that comes along. He just smiles his teenaged heart-throb smile, and I go on listening on our date.

I know that I am my own worst enemy in small ways, not just with Harry. I wash paper plates, wash the dishes before I put them in the dishwasher, and buy cakes at Sam's but then make boiled chocolate icing for them. I save money as I waste it. The same with my life. I have heard stories about the marriage of a couple in town, their living apart, him in Georgia, her in North Carolina, then their move back to Virginia. I don't have much sympathy for them. They are the ones deciding what's what. I don't get to decide when Harry comes and goes. I get to decide the green stain for the kitchen cabinets.

Len was talking about his Jeanne's last moment over the cookie sheet. He was certain that she had been thinking about Laura Norris' stealing from the store for years. She was only a breath away from eternity, and if she had known that, she might have thought of something different and not about Laura Norris. She might have recalled her girlhood or maybe even one of her first dates with him, when he had been so happy he'd almost wrecked his dad's '68 Chevy Nova.

Once when Harry and Estelle were away at Myrtle Beach for a week—Harry said they needed to get away—I tried to feel divorced, the way our boys want me to practice feeling, to get some relief, but it did not work. When they got back from the beach, I called Harry to ask him to come to a lacrosse game—our little nine-year-old grandson is a star on his team and plays early on Saturday mornings, when it isn't too hot to be outdoors. It would give Harry a break from Estelle after being cooped up with her at the beach. I still think of what Harry needs, and we will talk about what he needs when he takes me to lunch in Richmond and then sends me flowers. That's when I do feel a breath away from my real life, and not in eternity, but here on earth.