

T H E N E W Y E A R



E L L E N W I L B U R

At the Enright Company I was perceived by everyone to be hard-working and reliable. Often I remained at the office until after midnight and was back by 9 A.M. the following day. It didn't bother me that my whole life was focused on this job. I'd always been a person of extremes, and I found it oddly soothing to be driven through each moment by a single-minded purpose. For the past two months I'd given up most socializing, and felt lucky to have no outside interests to distract me.

I'd been at Enright for two years, and the more I learned about the business, the more excited and immersed in it I was. Some days my mind exploded with ideas, and I sat and stared, unseeing, at the view outside my office window. Time disappeared and in those moments, deep in thought, I felt light-headed and enthralled.

Christmas came and went like a hidden jet flying above the city clouds, and all I knew was the distant sound of its approach until, for an instant, the full roar of the holiday was loud and hovering in my ears before the noise dissipated, leaving behind a gulf of welcome silence. Now it was New Year's Eve. I had no plan to celebrate. All afternoon the weather had been freakish. There were

periods of snow, high wind, and every now and then a burst of sleet or pounding rain until it seemed that all the elements were pummeling the city. I'd been at my desk for hours, working on a speech I was to give at a convention in St. Louis the following Wednesday. My thoughts flowed easily onto the screen before me, and I marveled at myself, as I'd done many times in the past six months, as though I had become someone articulate and new; a person I didn't know. As I glanced out the window at the blinding weather, it seemed my head had never been so clear. People scurried miserably on the slippery street below while I sat sealed in silence at my desk, immaculate and dry, wearing a new, expensive suit. I'd left instructions not to be disturbed, and was startled by the buzzer on my phone. As I lifted the receiver, I was surprised to see how late it had become. The sky beyond the window was completely dark.

"Sorry to bother you, Sam," my assistant, Mary Aldridge, spoke quickly. "Your uncle is on line two. He says it's an emergency."

My uncle had never phoned me that I could remember, and at the sound of his deep voice, I rose to my feet. "Uncle Bill?" I said, amazed.

"Your mother is dying," he spoke flatly.

"Dying?" I half-whispered.

"She's had a stroke, and may not make it through the day," he said. His voice was cold. "May I tell her that you're coming?"

The phone in my hand began to shake so hard, I was afraid that I might break a tooth. "Of course I'll come," I said. "I'll come right away."

"She's at St. Elizabeth's," my uncle said. "In critical care." There was a click as he hung up.

I stood by my desk, looking at a heavy swirl of snow illuminated by the streetlights far below, and for a moment I was unable to move. My past had been so buried, so dead asleep within me, it seemed as though I had been living on entirely without it. Now the present world melted away. There was no floor beneath my feet, and I couldn't feel the desk I leaned against. After a hurried call to my boss, I prepared to leave. The weather was so threatening, no planes were flying out of town. I put on my coat, grabbed my briefcase, shut the office door behind me, and hurried past my colleagues with eyes averted, unable to speak or tell them what

had happened. The receptionist glanced up as I went by, but we said nothing.

Outside the building I managed to flag down a cab. "This is an emergency," I said to the driver, and I urged him to get me to the train station as quickly as he could. Before I knew it, I'd passed through a long line, bought a ticket for the two-hour ride, and was on the train.

I dropped my coat and briefcase on the seat beside me, hoping to discourage anyone from sitting there, and for the first hour of the trip I sat so still, it seemed that I was hardly breathing, staring wide-eyed out the window. I wondered how my uncle had located me. I hadn't called my mother or communicated with her since I'd disappeared from home eight years before, inspired by my brother, Jack, who'd run away six months before me, cutting all family ties. I'd no idea where Jack was or what had happened to him.

When I thought of my mother now, I could not blame or criticize her to myself the way I used to. She was not irritable, angry with Jack or me. She wasn't moody, joyous one week and miserable the next, shut up in her room in bed all day. She wasn't a loose woman with no idea who had fathered her two children or a drinker who could not keep a job. I didn't think of how she came and went and came and went, inspiring love and heartbreak everywhere. No friend, no lover, and no child could ever hope to permanently hold or keep her. She rushed forward blazing with affection, and then withdrew completely, like an ocean tide that left behind a giant stretch of beach. These were things I didn't think of. All negative thoughts of my upbringing were entirely erased, as though my mother's life depended on it. Instead, the love I had for her revealed itself to me.

I remembered her face, how beautiful it was. People on the street would turn to stare at her as though they didn't want to lose her image. Now, when I thought back on it, our kitchen looked warm and inviting. It was clean, and the refrigerator was well stocked. I saw my mother in a pretty apron, cooking supper, the table neatly set, and how she leaned forward with a beaming smile when Jack and I came home from school to hug us tight and kiss us. I saw us watching television, the three of us curled up together on the couch when I was small.

While I sat, unmoving in my train seat, it seemed that every

good thing she'd ever done enveloped me. I remembered how funny she could be, how uncontrollably she made me laugh at times, and as my love for her appeared to grow each minute, my view of myself became more ugly and demeaning. Tension and anxiety spread throughout my body until my agitation was so great that I could not sit still. I rose and had to walk repeatedly up and down the aisle in front of all the passengers. Ordinarily, I was a person who liked to make a good impression and cared what people thought of me. That day it didn't matter to me in the least how I appeared. A conductor, his eyes stern and alarmed, approached me and asked me to sit down.

"My mother is dying," I said harshly. Then, leaving my coat on the seat, I picked up my briefcase, and pushed past him out of the car. I began to walk the whole length of the train, doors opening and clicking shut behind me. Speaking to my mother in my mind, I said, "I'll give up everything if only you'll be alive to see me." Then, as though to prove my point, I detached the gold watch from my wrist, flung it down onto the floor, and kept going. I yanked off my hundred-dollar tie and hurled it into the air over my shoulder. A button popped off my new shirt when I tore at the collar. I held my briefcase tightly as I paused in the open air between two cars. Sleet beat against my face, the windy cold was bitter, and I could feel the slippery surface of the icy floor beneath me. I began to shake horribly, yet I could not go back to the warmth and comfort of the train. I wanted to suffer.

I began swinging my arms back and forth, tossing my head and moaning, and when I thought of my mother's face, I heaved the briefcase overboard with all my strength, my mind in a frenzy I had never known before. If I could prove that nothing mattered to me more than she did, maybe she would survive.

"Live, Mother!" I cried, as I threw my comb, my pen, and the loose change in my pocket into the whirling darkness. But it wasn't enough. Nothing was enough. The whole sickness of my life opened up to me in the dark like a picture that kept getting larger and larger and clearer and clearer until I couldn't bear it. Then, as I stood in the punishing cold, I tore open my sports jacket, tossed it overboard, and was reaching for the wallet in my pants pocket, when through the window of the car behind me I could see the conductor coming at a hurried pace. The thought of

being spoken to or touched by him was more than I could stand. When he reached the door, I flung myself against it. At first I held it shut, but the man was tall and heavy, and when the door burst open, I flew backward, skidding across the icy floor, while the conductor dove at me and pinned my shoulders hard against the wall. I struggled violently, but he rammed his knee into my abdomen and held me tight and still. My breath was knocked away, and for a moment there was just the sound of his explosive gasps and my choking for air. His enormous, ugly face was inches from my own, fierce and glaring. I'd never seen a face I hated more, with its giant nose and his ugly, yellow teeth. I could not stand to look at him, and shut my eyes. We said nothing. Minutes passed and he held me motionless, as though time had no meaning and the cold had no importance. At last my legs became so weak, I felt as if they would collapse, and when I tipped my head back to look up at him, the conductor spoke as though he saw the difference in me. "Are you ready to go in now?" he said. When I nodded, he pulled me forward, opened the door, and we entered the train. We walked together back through all the cars. I went before him like a prisoner, his hand planted firmly on my shoulder as he followed close behind. I offered no resistance and had no fight left.

When we reached my seat, he stopped me, leaned over to pick up my coat, and gestured to me to sit down. Handing me the folded coat, he settled in the aisle seat beside me. "We'll be arriving in the city soon," he said. I noticed that he had a brogue. "I'll be sitting beside you till we're there." He pulled out his cellphone and spoke to someone briefly. There seemed to be a roaring in my ears and I could not make out any word he said. I guessed he must be calling the police, and that I would be handed over to them the moment the train stopped. God only knew what would happen after that.

Without a word, I let my head fall back. The air in the car seemed stifling, yet instead of feeling warmed, I began to shiver. I felt quite sure I'd never see my mother. By the time I reached the hospital, she would be dead. I was sure she'd died while I was on this train. I could feel it. The urgency was gone. It was as though I'd run twenty miles on an empty stomach or lain down for a short nap and slept too long, so many hours that waking now the mood of the whole day had changed.

I allowed myself to ponder things that were forbidden an hour ago. I wondered if my mother had been outraged and furious with me all these years, the way she'd been about my brother's disappearance, which struck her as an unforgivable betrayal. Jack was eighteen when he left, a thin, tall boy, almost six feet. He'd failed at school and taken up with a bad crowd. His last year at home, he'd distanced himself. Some days we hardly spoke, like people who had nothing but shame in common. He spent more time out with his friends than he did at home, and when he left for good, my mother would not speak of him. It was as though he'd never been. She began to tell me that she had a special love for me. She'd always favored me, she said, once Jack was gone.

I wondered if she had been crushed with pain and lonely all these years. There was no way to know. Always I had blamed myself for abandoning her, and yet she'd never tried to reach me.

"I can't live here anymore," I wrote in the note I scribbled at the kitchen table that January morning when I said my last farewell. My mother's sister, Anne, who was a history teacher, and her husband, Karl, an engineer, for years had urged me to move in with them. They knew how bad the situation was at home, and they had no children of their own. In my note I told my mother where I'd be, knowing she'd never forgive her sister or speak to her again. I remember standing in the frigid kitchen, looking at the words I'd written. My mother had been gone for two days with a new lover. She'd disappeared like this before, and I expected she would soon return. It was clear that once again she hadn't paid the bills. There was no heat. The room was freezing. The telephone had been shut off, and the refrigerator was almost empty. That day I took a suitcase with me on the bus and a heavy satchel stuffed with my belongings. Anne was going to pick me up from school that afternoon.

Glancing at the conductor, I was surprised to find him dozing. The sight of his face no longer was repulsive, and I realized that I had become emotionally numb. Nothing could bother or upset me anymore. If a man stood in the aisle right now and shouted curses at a woman, I imagined it wouldn't move me in the least. Whether my mother was alive or dead, what difference would there be? This was how cold and utterly untouchable my heart seemed. And yet the moment the train began to slow and I could see that we

were entering the city, I was overcome with anguish. Bells were ringing as we came into the station. The conductor awoke, reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out my watch, the tie I'd thrown away over my shoulder, and handed them to me as he rose to his feet. He looked down at my ravaged face.

"It's a terrible thing to lose your mother," he said, tapping my shoulder. Then he walked out of the car.

I stood in my coat on the chilly platform, felt for the wallet in my pocket, and was grateful that I hadn't thrown it overboard. There were empty taxis waiting in a line outside the station, yet I decided to walk the eight blocks to the hospital. The air was cold and dark, but the weather here was clear without a sign of ice or snow upon the ground.

I knew the city well, and exactly how to reach my destination. My mind kept pace with every step I took. I'd never thought of death so frightfully or squarely as I did now, and I could feel the struggle in my brain, as though it wanted to pave out a path towards every possibility that lay ahead. Tomorrow was the new year, yet I moved forward slowly on the sidewalk, inching towards the past.