

Another Woman's House

TENILLE BROWN

SO FAR, THE ONLY GOOD THING I see about moving into Bess's house is that she lives way out, away from town and neighborhoods full of noisy children. It is peaceful out here, a far cry from where I came from where you could hardly hear your own self think. It will be a nice change, and besides, she needs me now.

I will miss that old house of mine, though. It has everything in it that I like, and I know where everything is. Most people don't know how old I really am, but I will admit that I'm too old to be learning things in somebody else's house when I don't plan to stay that long.

I'm glad that Bess finally broke down and decided to bring me here, though. That girl always had a proud streak in her, even when her folks were my neighbors and John Thomas first brought her home in pigtails for dinner. Back then they used to beat each other up and then turn right around and play tag. I liked her and I didn't do a thing but smile eleven years later when he told me he was going to marry her.

I knew it wouldn't be long before she came around, the way she carried on at John Thomas's funeral. And they had the nerve to escort me out of there! They said it wasn't good for my heart, but they let Bess sit up in the front row, wailing like nobody's business. My heart was just fine, but that girl was going just plain crazy in there.

The house sure looks smaller than I remember. I do not know how all my things will ever fit in one of those rooms, and the yard is hardly anything to work

with. I don't see John Thomas's truck anywhere. I guess she got rid of it all when he died. I can't say I blame her, though. I was like that when my old man died, too. I could not even keep a picture of him up because it brought back memories, far too many memories.

It was sweet of her to take the day off just to move my things in even though I could do it myself. I had just enough to fit in the back of this young man's truck—had to put my furniture up in storage—but like I said, the house is small and I don't know where I'll ever put my trinkets and things—and of course my crocheting needles. I figure while I'm here I'll fix Bess up a throw to go on the back of that horrible looking couch she refused to get rid of when she and John Thomas got married.

I don't like the way this young man is handling these curves on this dirt road, but at least we are almost there. I can see her standing on the porch from here, and she sure looks skinny. She's probably not eating half the time. Some ladies from the church told me they came by and dropped food off at the door. They said they came back a week later and found their Tupperware dishes still full, or turned over and torn into by all the strays that hang around.

She was pretty skinny back when John Thomas was still living, and I kept telling her that if she ever planned to give me any grandchildren, she would have to get some meat on them bones. There she goes biting her nails; Lord knows I have been getting onto her about *that* forever.

There she goes stuffing her hands in her pockets like I hadn't been watching her gnaw on her nails the whole time. She sure is a sneaky little thing, just like a cat.

"Thank you, young man," I tell the driver. "Just let me dig here in my purse a minute and I'll get you something for your troubles." I stretch my eyes toward the center of the seat. "You never did turn the meter on, did you? Ain't you just a sweetheart!"

Now he is looking at me funny, like it's something out of the ordinary for a passenger to offer the driver money. "Mrs. Greene," he says in that soft little voice of his, "Bess had me bring you. You don't owe me anything." He reaches for the handle on the door. "Now, if you'll just let me help you out, me and Bess can start unloading your things off the back."

"Young man, I don't need any help," I tell him, but he doesn't look too convinced, so I just go ahead and show him. I push that door right open and push

my leg out so that it is hanging near that runner thing they're putting on all the big fancy cars these days.

I see Bess has had the driveway done since I was here last, and she is hitting it with her sneakers now like some crazy woman. I know she is happy to see me, but she sure don't have to run.

"Mama!" she calls to me. "Don't try to step down from there like that. You might hurt yourself."

And protective too, she is. You wouldn't think I'm nearly forty years her elder. "I'm not going to hurt myself, child," I tell her, one hand on the door, the other holding on to hers because she seems afraid to let me go. "I can make it out of this truck and up those steps just fine," I say, trying once more to make a move.

This time the driver is around on my side, and he and Bess both are grabbing at me, and I feel like the first lady or something with the fuss they're making.

"Just let us help you, Mrs. Greene, okay?" he asks. He looks so hopeful with his big eyes that I just give in and let them usher me out of the truck and up the steps. They lead me to a wooden rocker that has a burgundy shawl thrown across the back and I sit in it and rock back and forth. It is right comfortable.

"Young man!" I try to get his attention. "Isn't there someone you can call, a friend or something to help you get those things down from there?" He passes Bess my box of pictures. "Bess sure don't need to be lifting those heavy things."

"I've got it, Mama. You just relax." She talks through her teeth, like somebody has gone and made her mad today. I don't say anything, though. I know how to deal with ornery women. I just sit in that chair, rocking and rocking. I think I'll make this my special chair; it's so comfortable and fits me just right.

I don't know how many trips they make in and out of that house because after the third or forth go round, I close my eyes and listen to the crickets mating or whatever they're doing back up in those woods.

When my eyes are open again, Bess is at the truck, and she and the driver are wrapped in an embrace. He kisses her on the forehead real tender like, but it's nothing romantic about it, not like her and John Thomas used to be.

After he has pulled away, she bolts up the fence like someone is going to come in here and steal me or something. Poor thing, she needs me around here so much she doesn't want to take any chances.

“I guess that’s it, Mama.” She didn’t always call me that. She preferred Mrs. Greene at first, but I told her that she was more than just some woman my son married; she was my daughter now.

“I just can’t wait to see what you’ve done with the place since I’ve been here last,” I say to her after she is back on the porch, leaning her thin body over my chair. “I don’t know why it seems so small, now. Has it been that long, Bess?”

“You haven’t been back here since I built this new house after the fire, Mama. But that’s not your fault.” She is smiling, but I am pretty sure I see the smallest hint of tears in her eyes.

She grew up to be a lovely young woman, and so stubborn she doesn’t want me to know how much she needs me here with John Thomas gone now and all.

“Come on, Mama, let’s go on inside. It’s supposed to get cool out pretty soon.” She reaches for my hand as if I might need some help getting up. I take it though, just so she’ll feel good.

“Yes, I do want to get started on supper,” I tell her, but she shakes her head in protest, those little twisty things shaking all over her head.

She walks with me close at her side, her skin-tight jeans making a swish-swishing sound. I bet she wouldn’t be wearing those britches so tight if John Thomas were still here. She looks right cute in them though, kind of like I used to be when I was young, tall and thin as a rail.

I’m gonna take good care of Bess, I am. I’m going to let her wear herself out trying to impress me my first day here. I know she wants me to think I don’t know why I’m here, but I do. I wouldn’t even let the driver stop and get me anything because I was ready to get here and get to cooking those yams Bess told me she had in the cabinet. I know they are her favorite, but she never could cook them worth nothing.

“I was thinking I could fry us up some chicken for dinner,” I say to her from the chair she has ushered me to in the living room. “How about that, Bess? Don’t that sound good?”

“You know you can’t have fried foods on your diet, Mama,” she says from the kitchen, a cordless phone right up to her ear.

“You listen to them folks if you want to. A little chicken ain’t gonna do nothing to me.”

She holds her finger up at me, letting me know that she is busy on the phone now.

“I know, Estelle,” she says, and not even in a semi-low voice. “She was like that even before John Thomas died. I told him that.”

She peeks around the corner and I look up at the ceiling just like I don’t hear a thing.

“I told him we need to see about getting her help, but he wouldn’t hear of it.” I know she must be on the line with my sister Estelle. She told me she would call after I got here.

“I take her for an evaluation tomorrow. I don’t know how she’ll react when they ask her about what happened in the house.” She switches the phone from her left ear to her right and lifts the lid off a pot on the stove.

I can’t believe she’s standing there talking about me like I’m not even in this house, and loud, too, not even trying to whisper. I ought to go in there and give her a piece of my mind, but who am I to tell a woman off in her own house? I’ll just sit right here in this chair and act like she’s got the upper hand.

I bet she wants Estelle to think I’m here because of my accident. Sure, sometimes I forget things, but I’m old and it’s my right. I raised four children and saw every last one of them dead in my lifetime. So what if I fall sometimes and break a few things? Nobody was perfect last time I checked. Wasn’t nothing terrible gonna happen to me in that house.

Now, I’m sure I’ll be right comfortable staying here with Bess, but I don’t care what she and Estelle have to say, I ain’t going nowhere tomorrow.

She peeks inside the oven after she hangs up. “Anyway,” she says, “I baked some chicken and I have some fresh vegetables for us. And then, if you want something later, I have plenty of fruit.”

I wish she had waited until I got here to start cooking so she could fix at least something that I like, but I know she was probably restless. I hope she is sleeping better. I know she had a hard time living here alone after the fire. She was gone that night to choir practice and John Thomas died in here alone. I know it must be hell living with that on her conscience.

“Well then fine, I’ll just fix our plates,” she says. “You just sit right down and I’ll bring yours out to you.”

I brace my arms on the chair so that I can lift myself up. “Don’t worry about it,” I tell Bess, “I can come and get it.”

But she is at my side, coaxing me back down in the chair again. I sure wish she would stop treating me like some invalid.

“I’ll get it, Mama.”

And she has such a gentle look on her face. “Well, if you must do something, Bess.”

So I let her get the chicken out of the oven. It smells good, but from where I’m sitting, it looks a lot lighter than anything I would have come up with. I sure hope she has it seasoned right. It’s one thing to have it baked, but quite another to have it baked and dry as a chip.

I figure since I’m just sitting, I’ll go ahead and set the table for us both. She has some pretty looking dinnerware up on this glass shelf. Humph, if this were my house, I would keep the plates right in here near the sink. But then, it’s not my house.

It is a good thing she and John never had children, I am thinking as I finally get myself on my feet and shuffle over to the cabinet. She can’t hear me because she is messing in the pots again, and I am walking barefoot on the thick blue carpet. Yep, she wouldn’t have a dish in the house if she had kids running around here. Children are sneaky like that, grabbing at dishes way up top that they can hardly reach and then sending everything crashing down to the—oh, oh my!

“Mama!”

I am wishing I could stand up again when I hear her calling out to me, running to me like some mad woman, that whole chicken going flying across the room.

“Mama!” she screams. “Don’t move.”

Like I *would* move even if I could in all this glass. I am groggy now from all the sharpness in my back and I wonder if this is what acupuncture feels like. I want to lick the dryness from my lips but there is glass all over my face, in my eyes even and where I can’t see glass, I see red, so much red.

Bess is on her knees in all this glass, and I want to tell her to be careful or she’ll cut her knees all up, but I swear I can’t say nothing.

“God, Mama, why did I leave you in here alone?” She is asking someone other than me because her hands are clenched together real tight and she is looking up at the ceiling.

I know she is just crying because I scared her so bad. She sure has become mighty protective of folks since John Thomas died. I would show her that I’m all right but I can’t move right this minute.

Now she has both hands on my chest, and she is pressing real hard and when that doesn’t satisfy her she starts shaking me, and I hear my brains rattling all over the place. This sure is no way to treat a guest. Matter of fact, Bess has been giving me trouble since I been here and I only came to help. But I know when I’m not wanted, and I’ll leave just as soon as she lets me alone and I can get up from here.

She has let me go and she is sitting there, the knees of her jeans dark red and soaking wet and is shaking, her mouth open letting out sounds I’ve never heard before. Those mood swings, boy I tell you. I wonder if she is going through the change on top of everything else?

I am mad and I am still set on leaving here when I can, but I can’t help it. She is a funny sight to me now even though she made me mad as all get out in here today. I open my mouth as wide as I can and laugh.

And laugh.

I laugh like the world is my playground and I’m feeling fine.