

# ESTHER'S AUNT

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The wisteria had grown in front of the white, three-story house for as long as Esther could remember. Even as an infant, her mother had carefully strolled her buggy behind the ancient vines and rich foliage that covered the activities of the front door. Heavy metal pipes were rigged, crisscross, to support the weight, adding to the sense of enclosure. The gray and purple blossoms attracted large, imposing bumblebees, holding the world at bay. The events of the household had been sheltered for more than seventy-five years. Esther loved her privacy.

The property belonged to the Family, though Father's fraternity brother, a stout old lawyer from Elmira, New York, controlled the deed. The three-storied house held three apartments, with the three mailboxes holding a common name---McWalter. This had always been Esther's home. The Great Depression was genteelly ignored during her childhood. Even as the house was divided into apartments to cover the mortgage, Esther's parents guaranteed that she felt no want.

For thirty-eight years she returned the obligation of security with their care, a burden hardly felt. It was not until they had both passed on that she allowed herself the diversion of marriage. With a sprig of wisteria in her hair and her Aunt Hazel in attendance, Esther changed her marital status--- but not her name. She was the final McWalter.

The apartments shared the same front door, bearing the family name engraved in brass, while the stairway foyer offered separate entries for all the households. Esther and William Thomas lived on the first floor, and had for years. Their apartment contained a kitchen, bedroom, bath, parlor and William's studio, formerly Esther's childhood bedroom. Aunt Hazel had retired from the post office and asked to be moved from the second floor up to the third story efficiency; -"I don't need that much space anyway,"- leaving the two bedroom flat for the various newly-wed cousins who passed through at regular intervals. After Hazels' move, it had become a family practice to offer the furnished apartment as a wedding gift---a place to begin in, a place to grow from.

Hazel's third-floor walk-up offered compact comforts. The stairwell from the second to third was tight, allowing only one person passage. The ancient wallpaper was faded, with that certain odor of paste and plaster. All necessities were provided for, including a WC with unused tub. The plywood tub-cover became a handy ironing board holder and utility shelf. The kitchenette in the corner was an all-in-one unit with storage cabinets attached. She liked her sink. That is where she bathed. The single place setting of Spode china and Rogers Bros. Sterling, saved from the auction when Grandmother's belongings were scattered like ashes, did not take much room. One wooden chair sat at attention by the small dinette table. She often placed the washed dish and silver back on the table, in anticipation of her next meal.

Hazel maintained her privacy behind a hand-painted antique Chinese screen that

provided the semblance of bedroom as she slept and dressed alone. The rare visitor sat on the only couch she ever owned, over-stuffed and faded maroon, purchased with the savings from her first year as a postal employee. The matching velvet chair showed the imprint of Hazel's daily use, the nap crushed precisely at the place where she sat. The floor lamp cast enough light to read and work the Sunday puzzle. Her mother's needlepoint covered the ottoman, and special care was taken to keep it clean. The radio and telephone sat side by side on a narrow table near the chair and no one ever knew that Hazel had an occasional relationship with an all-night talk host. He was witty and when he wasn't, she turned him off. Once she had called him, but the screener must have deemed her unworthy, because she never got to speak.

All those steps and a sharp tongue kept neighbors away. Hazel had endured enough of annoying "chit-chat" after forty-two years at front counter clerking, and she preferred her privacy, thank you. The in-and-out cousins thought her a strange one, and Esther and William came up only when invited. That was once, her moving day. She did love Esther, but why waste breath.

Once a week she descended and walked to the corner where the city bus took her away. She wore the last of her "work dresses." Red Cross shoes carried her and her black leather pocketbook with three carefully counted and folded twenty dollar bills to market. Hazel would return with two grocery totes and a waxed bag of pastries. She would ring Esther's bell, open the door, leave the sweets on the entry table and then climb her stairs. Esther knew better than to come to the door and speak. Last week's Sunday paper waited there for Hazel. The waxed bag became a silent "thank you" to the couple on the first floor. This ritual continued for sixteen years.

Esther was head nurse of Three-West, Clarkstown General. The flow of war-torn boys had made its way through her ward for several years after Korea. William had suffered lower leg nerve damage. Esther never expected to fall in love. He never expected to run again. They were well suited. William drew a pension and on better days he did free-lance layout for various advertising firms. He was often in the studio. Since Esther worked days, he had become quite adept at soup-and-sandwich suppers. Esther was pleased when he remembered gingersnaps on a saucer. Their time together was satisfying. William would listen to her hospital stories and Esther would appreciate his listening.

Hazel refused to admit that there was someone else in the house. William's presence was ignored, even though only stair steps separated them. Esther was glad that William was home, "just in case", because she felt that, at age eighty-one, Hazel should be asking someone for help. But she never did, and that fact left a vague empty spot in Esther's life.

Hazel, for all her queer ways, appreciated life. She loved the view from her front alcove. A large window opened the entire nook and Hazel often dragged her dining chair to sit. She had an overlook of the house across the street, and could see a nearby lake. There was a feeder attached to the window sill, providing a treetop grocery store for the neighborhood birds. A clothesline and pulley led from the window to a huge oak tree, but she never hung her clothes out. "No need to let the neighbors see my bloomers flappin'." If a squirrel decided to tight-rope walk to the feeder and clean out all the seeds, so be it. He was hungry, too. Hazel enjoyed watching the leaves bud, blossom and expand on the trees that shaded her third-story home.

Although she never said, she was deeply saddened by the childlessness of Esther and William. A baby would have been nice to carry on the name, but she would have never asked to hold it. She was just that way.

One morning, mid-July, Esther was surprised when Aunt Hazel called to ask, "Would you mind checking my mailbox when you do yours? I just don't want to traipse those stairs. My pension check is due."

Being needed surprised the niece, but worried her, too. From that day on, she checked the box and called upstairs with news of its content. When there was mail, which was infrequent, Esther would offer to bring it up and was always refused. Hazel would tromp on down, grumbling in her faded housedress, and carry up her envelope.

"At least she lets me call her," thought the younger one.

The late August heat was stifling. Today was Esther's day off and she had spent most of it on the porch swing, being cooled by the shade of the vine. The second floor cousins had just moved out, and Grandfather's fraternity brother, the lawyer from Elmira, had notified her that the next family wedding was still a few weeks away. Hazel had caught the bus in the morning and was not due back until late. William had a contract to work on and Esther was happy for the chance to be still. The swing soothed her and the shadows cast through the leaves calmed her mind.

The hospital had been hectic lately. Administration had revamped Three-West, changing Orthopedics to Oncology. Casts to cancer. It had been many years since nursing school, and for the first time in her career, she felt ill prepared. The summer had been hard, with evening refresher courses and all, but Nurse McWalter was finally secure in her ministering. She had to admit that broken bones had not offered the challenge for care that she was now facing. The day-off felt good.

"Esther?"

She must have dozed on the swing. Hazel was standing beside her.

"May I sit?"

Never had Hazel asked to spend time with Esther. She silently made room for her aunt. The two sat and rocked for many minutes. Esther waited, more nervous than not, for the older woman to speak.

"Esther, I am almost eighty-two."

The niece nodded and waited.

"I do not want to lose my dignity. I do not want to be one of those who wet themselves and cry. Do you love me?"

The niece nodded.

Quietly Hazel left the porch and climbed the steps. It was late evening before Esther realized that there had been no shopping bags or pastries.

As the season advanced, Esther noticed that there were days when Hazel did not come for her mail. She worried, but said nothing as Hazel would have become angry. She did take her weekly trek to shop, and Esther enjoyed the baked goods.

However, November brought an early snowstorm, and Hazel called upon Esther.

“Dear, I have a special favor to ask you.”

“Oh Hazel, you know I would do anything to help you.”

“Well. If it isn’t a bother, I need to have some things picked up at the store.”

Esther was ecstatic to be of help. The shopping list contained an assortment of items: a can of this, a pint of that, a small package of something else, and of course, birdseed. She was also allowed to climb the two flights of stairs to deliver them. When the apartment door was opened, Esther asked if she might step in. It had been many years since she had enjoyed the view of the lake from the front window.

As she watched the snow fall, she noticed that Aunt Hazel walked with tiny steps to join her. She also noticed something else. Hazel smelled strongly of urine.

“Do you need me to put a few things in the wash?” asked the niece.

“No.”

Esther let herself out, taking the three folded bills offered for the shopping, leaving the Aunt standing silently, looking out of the window.

When Esther told William what had happened, all he said was, “That’s the way it is when you get old.” Esther remembered the day on the swing and wished for youth.

By early December, Hazel regularly called on Esther to bring her groceries. She met her niece at the door, took the shopping bags and made sure that Esther had bought herself sweets, “With the change.” She never invited her in.

Esther was excited as Christmas approached. Fresh newly-weds were settling in, and the wife was expecting already. It was not proper to count the months, but Esther felt sure that nature had occurred before nuptial. Ah, well, God bless them anyway.

A holiday meal for all was planned, and Hazel phoned to accept her invitation. This would be the first time all three families would meet each other. Esther had saved her vacation time and she planned her tasks with loving care. There would be turkey and all the trimmings, sweet potatoes for William, rice with almonds for the newly-weds. (The portion with the almond ensured good fortune for the coming year, and Esther planned to serve the bride the lucky spoonful.) But, most of all, she wanted to please Hazel with scalloped oysters. Hazel’s

sister-in-law, Esther's mother, had invented the recipe and it had been years since it had been prepared. Esther wanted the dish to come out just right. Thank goodness the store carried the critters fresh by the pint.

At precisely two P.M. Christmas Day, the telephone rang. Hazel hated to bother, but would William please escort her to dinner? Esther had wondered if Hazel could manage the steps and the phone call answered the question. She admonished William to be careful, as neither of them was strong. Esther did not want any mishap to spoil the day.

In the basket on the entry table Esther left small gifts for everyone. The cousins were welcomed into the family with monogrammed hand towels. Hazel grumbled about her tin of gourmet cashews, and then passed them around for all to enjoy. William ate too many chocolate-covered cherries, even though he had been warned about his appetite. Esther unexpectedly found a small, decorated box with her name on it. With a smile meant only for William, she quickly slipped it into her apron pocket, unopened.

At the bottom of the pile, a beautifully wrapped package remained. The box contained one of Esther's engraved silver infant spoons. Who knew where the newly-weds would be when the baby came, and it was only right that there be a touch of heritage in its new life.

The dinner conversation turned to the newly-weds and their baby name selections. Hazel remembered the names of brothers and sisters in the family. The discussion was rich with history.

"Geraldine? I don't remember a Geraldine."

The young mother-to-be knew many of the names mentioned. 'Geraldine' did not ring a bell.

"Geraldine was my father's grand aunt," offered Hazel. "Sort of what I would be to your baby---its Grand One." Hazel chuckled to herself. It was so silly to call oneself 'grand'.

The young ones were chattering on about their life together. They loved their apartment. They adored their view. They worshipped each other. They--- Suddenly Hazel gasped, wrapped her arms around herself and moaned. Her body swayed to the side and collapsed against William. Her eyes filled with horror as she watched her most private blood stain the lap of her dress and flow to the floor. Later Esther realized that it was she who called, alerting the rescue squad. The ambulance quickly carried Hazel away.

The prognosis came swiftly. Uterine cancer, terminal. Hazel had known since summer, but had refused treatment. "It's my time," was all she told her doctor. Head Nurse McWalter rearranged the floor duties so that she would be caring for the patient McWalter. It broke her heart, but it also gave her a strange sense of release. Within two weeks, Hazel was being sustained solely by I.V fluids as her body could no longer tolerate nourishment. The pain became intense and she could only find comfort in morphine.

The call bell for room 326 was flashing. Hazel needed Esther.

"Esther, do you remember that day on the swing?"

The niece nodded.

“Did you understand what I said?”

“You wanted your dignity.”

The aunt nodded. “Do you love me?”

“I love you deeply.”

“Then help me go away.”

Their tears mixed as the strong one held the strong-willed one.

The broken vile of drug was duly reported in triplicate by the Head Nurse. She had accidentally dropped it while preparing meds. The terminal patient in 326 was found dead at evening rounds. The family was notified. Arrangements were made. Everyone at the hospital thought it was sad that Nurse McWalter had missed being with her aunt as she died, as they knew the women had been close.

The spring was early coming that year. The wisteria blossomed richly, covering the front of the house. Esther loved her privacy.