



I

“I am not a burrito.”

Lyman Forrester lived his first fifty years in disbelief of the fact that he was an ugly man. Largely this was a matter of his disinterest. Self-absorption wasn't in him. He was one of the out-focused, one of those few beings who consistently sees others before himself.

Because he was highly call-able, he had many friends who overlooked the visual of him, as they need not observe him directly. It was his listening ear that drew all manner of folks to Lyman. His skills as a master tailor and, later in life, as a physical therapist required only that he do the impeccable work that made clients look remarkably handsome or recover remarkably well; thus, his appearance was neither a topic of conversation nor concern.

The kindness of Lyman was known, as predictable as topography and as seemingly permanent. Weathers internal and external did not erode it, not in the lifetimes of his people, his clan. He was a powerful presence, like land, sun, and rough-barked trees. Simply there.

Lyman's facial features—eyebrows, cheeks, jaw—dipped downward as if gently melted. When he smiled, which was most of the time, the result startled, so out of place was the upturn of his mouth on a face designed for frowns. Black hair covered his muscular forearms, abruptly ending at the elbow as if he had been mowed. He had a full head of thick hair that grew straight up from his skull like surrendering hands. This hair feature did nothing to attract women but did put him in good stead with children.

It was only when Eloise entered his life like a door slam that Lyman took a look at himself through eyes belonging to the woman he instantly loved. He'd been struck by love's lance before but not with this

accuracy, not with this ferociousness. True, he'd also been found lacking by some a few times during a career that found him abandoning tailoring and reinventing himself as a physical therapist, but these he could dismiss as circumstantial in nature, lacking in substance. Failing at an endeavor was not the same thing as being unappealing. But seeing himself as unappealing because he wasn't appealing to this particular woman got him wondering if other revelations were in the offing. He intended to win her.

Their first meeting was like any ordinary moment between two people, the portent only sensed at all if both are precisely attuned to it. More often such a moment is lost forever. Sometimes the moment gains the proportion of hugeness if those two people draw toward each other again—and again. When that happens, their moment of first meeting begins the narrative of their relationship. Such a story is, of course, perceived by each of the pair's point of view. But it becomes the reality for them, more real than reality. Only rarely does such a moment forever transform two people. Such was Lyman and Eloise's first moment.

Eloise might be forgiven for the belligerence of her response upon seeing Lyman for the first time given that she was nine days into recovering from a stroke that felled her one-hundred-pound frame. She was generously drugged, significantly incoherent, marginally conscious, and so infuriated by this loss of control that she rumbled and shook from her stem to her stern.

Quietly opening the door and stepping into her hospital room, Lyman said, "Miss Eloise Dewmore, I am Lyman Forrester. Hello. Your daughter Mira should be with us any minute. She has engaged me to assist you in regaining use of all your faculties."

"Eat dirt."

Lyman was entranced. Her voice.

Arriving, and now just outside Eloise's room, ear pressed to the door, Mira considered this exchange a hopeful sign. Her mom seldom spoke well to anyone. To those she distrusted, she spoke not at all.

This general reluctance to speak was not a condition of her recent

bout with mortality. Her voice had emerged from this ordeal intact, as if her stroke knew better than to mess with her speech and so contented itself with rendering her partially paralyzed on the left side of her body.

Lyman found looking at Eloise most pleasant, despite the fact that half of her was motionless. She had the curly copper hair of a pretty woman half her age. Her face on the pillow, circled by lustrous waves, reminded him of an angry sunset.

He was right on that score...Eloise was angry. Since this was her natural condition since childhood, no one known to her would have expressed surprise when after being incapacitated by a random bubble of blood that snuck into her brain, her anger increased.

As Lyman stood beside her bed, smiling down at her, she took verbal aim. "Leave me." Her one good eye narrowed. The other eye lacked focus, like a dead fish eye.

"You have a good voice, strong."

"You have the face of a mud puddle."

"Full sentences already. Wonderful. Eloise, you are going to speed down the highway to recovery."

"Mud puddle."

Lyman tucked Eloise's blanket snugly down her sides and continued to smile at her.

"Stop that. I am not a burrito," she said.

He laughed. "Rest now, El. We will start you sitting up in the morning. For now, I want you to think happy thoughts and entertain sweet dreams."

Eloise noted in rapid succession Lyman's further crimes against her person: (1) *no one* was permitted to call her "El"—she was not a letter and hated the nickname; (2) whoever "we" were, she was not among them and would not sit up unless she was in the mood, which was unlikely; (3) happy thoughts and Eloise did not keep company, ever—her entire existence was based on expressing the opposite; and, finally, (4) sweet dreams had vanished from her nights many years ago and with good reason, which she chose not to think about.



“I will take care of that situation.”

Lyman switched off the bedside lamp and closed Eloise’s door. He looked forward to seeing her again in the morning. Her anger boded well for a full recovery. He could channel that force to help her.

Outside the room, Mira’s impression upon meeting Lyman was a sequel. She had engaged his services via a phone call and had met his voice first. She liked the commanding voice. Hearing it again now as he stood next to Mom’s bed and assessed her therapeutic needs, she thought his words were those of someone present in the moment. He talked to Eloise, not at her. She expected to like his face, which, in her opinion would bear no resemblance to a mud puddle.

What she hadn’t predicted was the height of the man. In her experience, kindness emanated most often from figures of the teddy-bear species. Round, soft, cushiony people had kind voices. She had dated Ruben solely on his resemblance to this perception. It was a short acquaintance.

Lyman now offered an opportunity to heighten her point of view.

He wasn’t merely tall. Lyman was a vertical phenomenon. As she tried to imagine him standing next to her mom, she was put in mind of a lowercase letter *b* or *d*, depending.

“Hello.” His baritone echoed kindness from his height downward to her ears.

“I’m the daughter.” She immediately wondered why she hadn’t specified, “I am Mira Dewmore, Eloise’s daughter.” She had made herself sound like a bit player in the comedic drama that was Eloise: “the shopkeeper,” “the third dancer on the left,” “the daughter.”

His right hand extended. “I am the physical therapist.”

Her hand disappeared in the mitt of his. They exchanged first names. “Do you think you can help her?” Mira asked. “Mom is not what I’d describe as an easy patient.”

His other mitt touched her shoulder ever so lightly. “Rest easy. As long as we don’t treat her like a patient, I think we can look forward to your mom helping herself.”

Three months earlier, much to the relief of passengers on the Chicago–Northwestern commuter train number 726, Chicago to Aurora, Illinois, Eloise Dewmore had disembarked about mid-route at the Elmvile Main Street station.

The out-breath of hydraulic brakes voiced the communal sigh of their ease. Three times during the forty-five-minute ride, Eloise had gotten out of her seat and confronted others for noise violations: the middle-aged woman who munched on a granola bar, the porter who failed to force from the train a teenager singing along with his MP3 player, and the baby who was crying—or rather, the baby’s mother.

Some passengers glanced through the train windows to witness the town’s audacious preference for greenery. Elmvile was founded in 1882 on a pancake-flat prairie by European immigrants whose prior notion of home was bumpier and featured bouldered hills, quiet rivers, and trees. They settled for planting elm trees in excess—trees that caressed boulevards, stood watch around homes, and dipped languorous roots in the few available creeks. Although American towns lost fifty-eight of their seventy-seven million elm trees within sixty years to Dutch elm disease, enough remained here so the town needn’t apologize for its name. The passengers’ view was somewhat flawed by the smudge of Eloise stomping across the wood platform. Her wheeled briefcase flounced behind her, unable to quite keep up with the strides of a woman who was moving like a pair of hedge shears.

“Well, this won’t do. This won’t do at all,” Eloise bellowed at the one-

story, brick station house as if the building should be ashamed of itself.

No one was nearby. No one had come to escort her to her job interview for the position of public relations director at Happy Meadows Assisted Living. No one had come to thank her for journeying from her Chicago condo some forty miles east to Elmville, where she had been born fifty-three years before and from where she had plotted her escape shortly thereafter. She succeeded in leaving when she was eighteen, although even Eloise should admit, but would not, that leaving thirty-five years ago was achieved with considerable assistance.

Desperation was her sole motivation for returning now. She needed this job. A recent economic downturn and subsequent merger had eliminated her previous position in the city. In fact, she was terrified of health-related facilities. And, she was terrified of Elmville generally, given her childhood here. She also was terrified her thirty-five-year-old daughter Mira, who currently lived in Elmville, might not view her arrival with enthusiasm.

As was her way when dealing with any primal emotions, Eloise ignored them. Instead, she took action. Her interview was in two hours. She decided to visit St. Mary's Cemetery where her parents were buried thirty years ago—the year she turned twenty-three and the year her little girl was five years old.

Only three elm-lined streets separated the train station from the town's oldest cemetery, as if town fathers in the late 1800s expected their departed citizens to attract hordes of city mourners. Its two acres were surrounded by homes on three sides and by Elmville College's athletic field on its remaining side. Eloise figured early residents who placed the cemetery in the middle of this quiet neighborhood either were less freaked out by death or more familiar with it.

As she pushed it open, the iron fence gate creaked in the satisfying way a cemetery gate should creak. A coach's shrieky whistle blew in the distance, interrupting the silence that hovered over the tombstones. Few gravestones competed for privilege by size or placement. Most rose a tidy foot or two above the earth.

Eloise made a noise of her own as she shuffled among golden elm leaves toward the corner plot where her parents reposed. She took more time than needed to get to it, enjoying a bit of comfort from the familiar crunch of foliage under her feet. Throughout her life, that sound meant home, not the house where she lived but her sense of a place. Despite many years living in the city, she was a tree-town girl. When she was a child, the elms were of such height and advanced age, she considered them permanent, and she felt safer beneath them than in her house. Sixty feet tall with upper canopy leaves spreading a full acre, she walked beneath them in every weather and season, grateful for their comfort as she plotted her escape.

There had been some pleasant childhood years: small bonfires in the backyard at night in autumn to burn leaves, before the environment police woke up and outlawed them, and birthday parties for other little girls her age who ate pink-iced cakes and wore stiff petticoats and stiffer patent leather shoes, before Eloise's mother outlawed her from attending those gatherings.

She slowed her steps when she saw their headstones: identical, modest, salt-and-pepper stones chiseled with the same day of death. On her mother's, a black rose was etched above the words "Rosalee Dewmore (née Newton) 1939–1991." Above her father's, no symbol. Cold, carved words: "Wade Dewmore 1937–1991."

Eloise stared at their names awaiting some swell of emotion, some memory to show up, some sense of legacy to engulf her. She waited. Minutes passed. The fall breeze gusted warm through elm branches, sending more and more leaves dive-bombing to the ground. They began to gather near and around her feet.

She kicked her right shoe free, then her left. She kicked again at nothing, just air.

"Why?" like a word repeatedly written on a blackboard in her mind, the single word began a litany of itself, growing in volume at each repetition. "Why? Why?"

"Why didn't you love me? *Why?*"

She stood for more minutes. Nothing was summoned, no memory, no emotion.

No answer.

No surprise.

She hadn't expected... She didn't know what she had expected... that time had changed what happened? That her parents would send some surprising, loving message from beyond the grave? She chided her stupidity. She was not a woman who was surprised. She turned to leave. The hustle-bustle of leaves created a windy whirlpool around her feet. She thought of her daughter Mira.

Mira's conception ranked as one of the few genuine surprises in Eloise's life. She had not planned Mira, or any child, ever, when she met the boy who became Mira's father. Responsibility of any kind was the last thing on her mind when she was seventeen. Her focus was on one thing: she wanted to get out of Elmville. And, Chad, Mira's soon-to-be dad, had a car. This single fact brought him to her attention as she struggled through her final high school courses. She had to take classes year-round to compensate for the fact she hadn't attended school for numerous months of the required years from kindergarten through senior year of high school.

Chad was friendly in the way of someone who doesn't think often... or much. He impressed Eloise with his generosity, evident in his agreement to drive her wherever she wanted to go, whenever she wished. It occurred to her during the year they knew each other that she might wear out her welcome in his life since she offered nothing to him... with one significant exception. One night she was feeling guilty about taking advantage of him, so she let Chad kiss her while they were in his car in the darkened parking lot of Denny's Pancake House, located about half the distance between Elmville and Chicago. Chicago was where she planned to move the split second she was legally adult.

Her experience with boys, which would be in the minus digits if recorded, left her ill prepared to handle Chad's resulting enthusiasm for kissing and subsequent embraces. Before she could say "holy Toledo,"

she understood what going all the way meant. She had not been forced. She simply had been unprepared to manage or control Chad's obvious affections. She could not process emotions, even loving ones. She hadn't intended this. Being in love was not among her intentions either, and on that score she was successful. She definitely wasn't in love with Chad. Thus, a baby's subsequent residency within her womb was an anatomical possibility she'd never considered beyond her Biology 101 class, in which this likelihood was mentioned in what seemed, in retrospect, a vague and cavalier manner.

She was stunned, confused, and scared but had no knowledge of how to express her feelings. In the unexamined region of her teen psyche, she thought that making a baby should be much more complicated than the brief coupling that occurred between them. But, it was not Chad she turned to when she learned there was a little entity inside her. She considered Chad too dumb to be a father. He was the generous owner of transportation and unexpectedly affectionate and decidedly dumb.

Instead, she went to Auntie Clarise Kouba, the closest she had to a functioning mother and from whom she had received kindness during the last nine years she had been living in her home—sharing Auntie with Uncle Howie and their twin daughters, Lisa and Laney. Auntie Clarise took almost everything about Eloise in her stride. She did not take the news of Eloise's pregnancy in stride. When Eloise told her as they stood in the living room, her hand flew to her wide-open mouth to intercept what appeared to have all the makings of a primal noise.

What did emerge was a sound more like a motor stuttering as she reached with her free hand for the arm of a nearby wing chair flanking the fireplace of the small room. She slowly descended into the cushion and took some breaths, quite a few of them. Then she stood and reached out both of her arms to Eloise who, almost always uncomfortable with physical contact, walked straight into them and received the woman's hug.

Together, they came up with a reasonable response to the news.

Did Eloise wish to carry her baby to term?

Yes.

Did Eloise intend to keep her baby?

Yes.

Did Eloise wish to remain with the baby's father?

Considering it took Eloise a few moments to remember that Chad was a significant participant in all this, Auntie Clarise concluded the answer to that one would be a no.

Did Eloise believe she could complete all her schoolwork and obtain her high school diploma during the next seven months that remained before her baby was born?

Yes.

Did Eloise intend to inform her mother and father about the pregnancy?

Even in Eloise's state of mind, which was edging toward the country of the overwhelmed, she noted her auntie's semantic alteration...from referring to her "baby" to referring to her "pregnancy." The former was a person, the latter a situation.

"No," Eloise stated.

Here Auntie Clarise submitted her first opinion. "I will take care of that situation."

Eloise nodded.

With the basics settled, Eloise turned her attention back to her plans: get out of high school, get out of Elmville, get a job, get rich—more or less in that sequence—with a baby added to the mix.

She told Chad that she was pregnant. He was generous. They agreed he would provide some financial help when he graduated high school and began working in his dad's auto mechanics shop, but Eloise alone would raise their child. That settled, they broke up, leaving Chad somewhat sad and much relieved.

Eloise was somewhat sad that her mode of transportation was gone but equally relieved. Their interchange had a side benefit. It marked the beginning of Eloise's understanding that she could tell people what to do and get away with it. Despite her early years of feeling powerless,

for some reason, others obeyed her. That reason was elusive but valuable.

Of course, Mira was, and remained, the exception to this superpower. As her conception had been a surprise, her actual existence ranked as an ongoing, life-altering revelation to her mother. Now that Mira was thirty-five and Eloise fifty-three, they had come to abide this.

Mira consistently surprised Eloise, and vice versa. As she walked the half mile to her interview at Happy Meadow Assisted Living, she wondered what her daughter would make of her arrival. Although they met for dinner once a week, Eloise hadn't mentioned this upcoming interview.

She wondered what she herself would make of it.

Her abhorrence of hospitals and doctors, the health-care industry in general, was itself a disease, born of experience, fueled by memory, and stoked by fear. Mira was one on those experiences. Thirty-five years ago, when her daughter was delivered prematurely and Eloise's blood refused to coagulate, Eloise had been rushed into surgery before she even held her tiny girl. She emerged hours later to a world of pain and lingering weakness as she met Mira for the first time. A robust nurse nestled the baby on her chest. She could barely lift her arms around the bundle, which, she noted with some level of pride, bawled loudly in anger or outrage or aggression. Eloise figured it was a combination of all those things and felt an immediate affinity for her.

The infant had taken over her body to suit herself and introduced her mother to unexpected trauma. And now she seemed determined, based on the volume of her wails, to have the last word. Eloise instantly lost her heart to her. During the child's early years, when Mira's father would make one of his very occasional visits, Eloise felt both terror and elation: terror he could dismantle every routine she had devised to put some order into their lives and elation when she saw their daughter's joy at the sight of him. Eloise knew what that joy felt like—the anticipation, the hope, of being loved. She knew too well how such joy proved to be an illusion.

It remained Eloise's mission to keep Mira safe during and in between