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One Time a Stranger

by
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CHAPTER

1

COOLEY JUNIOR LIFTED THE MILK BOTTLE, its glass etched with age and neglect, and poured water into a blue pottery bowl, the glaze's old crazing shielding a circle of yellow buttercups. Mrs. Fletcher gave him the bowl on his twelfth birthday—almost five years ago. When she served him and Danny B her leftover beef stew in it, he remarked it was the prettiest bowl he ever saw. After they finished eating and she washed it, she handed it to him. "I'd like for you to have it. It's an old thing I don't use anymore." But she had used it, serving her wonderful stew to him.

It was the prettiest birthday gift he ever got, though he never told her it was his birthday.

Stooping to creep outside the old abandoned chicken coop where Cooley Junior and his father lived, he went to the side of the shack and set the bowl on the weathered and cracked bed of their useless old truck. He washed his face, brushed his teeth, then splashed the remaining drops of water on a nearby cluster of wild lavender.

Back inside the shack, he checked to make sure his daddy had all he needed for the day. Cooley Junior poured a glass of water and placed it on the brick beside his daddy's pallet, next to the almost empty brown medicine bottle.

He stroked his father's arm. "Daddy, I'm leavin' now. Will you be all right till I get back tonight?"

"Where you goin', son?" Cletus Cooley, Sr., barely opened his eyes. He hadn't slept well.

"It's nearly six o'clock, Daddy—time to go to work. I'll see you tonight, okay? You'll be all right?"

"Oh. Right. Yeah. I'll be fine. You go on." He forced a little grin and patted his son's hand.

Cooley Junior was already at the door when his daddy spoke again. "You know I love you."

Cooley Junior smiled, savoring the passionate benediction his father had offered so often during his lifetime. It bolstered him

every time.

“I love you, too.” He bent to touch his father’s cheek, then straightened the sheet and thin blanket covering the ailing man.

Cooley Junior grabbed an empty bucket and set off on the two-mile trek to town. He looked up, hoping for clouds that vowed to bring rain, but the sky was bright and clear and crystalline blue. The scorched Texas plains needed water.

He hiked with his usual firm rhythm and determined gait. The scuff of his tatty high-top shoes, soles worn thin, spun dust into clouds that clung to the ragged cuffs of his overalls. He marched with eyes steady on the rutted road. Forty minutes later, he was at the west side of Tibbitt.

“What’s with that bucket there?”

Cooley Junior halted and looked to his right. He was at Mrs. Weaver’s place, the first house at the edge of town. He knew who Mrs. Weaver was, but they’d never spoken. She was standing inside the gate of her backyard with its lavish garden. The woman was thin, with dyed black hair piled high, and wearing a red housecoat. She looked like a firecracker.

“Ma’am?” He stood in the middle of the road, wondering why she talked to him.

“I’m curious about that bucket you’re carryin’. I see you go by here ever’ day with that thing. Empty in the mornin’, it appears. Heavy at night.”

“Oh. Yes, ma’am. Wherever I’m workin’ at, I get water to take back home.”

“What do you do that for? That’s mighty cumbersome.”

“It’s the only water we’ve got.” Cooley Junior didn’t like to talk about how he and his father lived. As his father lamented more than once, “We haven’t never hit a rock bottom this far down before.”

“There idn’t any water out at that little ol’ place you and your daddy are livin’ at now?” Everyone knew where the Cooleys lived, and when they moved there, and why. Tibbitt was a small town where everyone kept track of what everyone was doing. What the Cooleys did was more a matter of gossip than goodwill.

“No, ma’am. There’s an ol’ well out there, but that thing must’ve dried up years ago. There’s ever’thing but water in it now.”

Mrs. Weaver’s frail body shivered slightly. “You know what? I think the Holy Spirit is callin’ on me to perform an act of kindness. So here’s what I’ll do. If you want to, you can leave your

bucket here inside the gate ever' mornin'. Then, on your way home, fill it from my cistern over there. That way you won't have to be luggin' that thing so far."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am." Cooley Junior's smile filled his face. "I do appreciate that. You sure you don't mind?"

"Well, now, I wouldn't've offered if I'd've minded, don't you think?" She spoke with the undercurrent of a light chuckle. "'Course, if the cistern starts gettin' low on us, like it did a couple of summers ago, then I cain't let you be takin' the water. I got to have that for my garden you see here. It takes a right smart bit for all I got planted, and I'm plenty proud of what I've got. But it's lookin' like the water'll hold up good enough this year, in spite of this dry spell. So you help yourself. Just be sure you put the lid back on the cistern and latch the gate when you leave. I don't want old man Pendleton's goats gettin' in here again. Those mangy critters perty much ate ever'thing I had here couple-a years ago—devoured half of my bountiful harvest."

"Didn't Mr. Pendleton die last year?" Tibbitt was a small town. Even poor folks heard all the news from somebody.

"Yeah, the crazy old man died, but his dang goats didn't. They wander 'round all over the place nowadays, multiplyin' an' destructin'. That's all they do. Them things is awful ignorant creatures, even if God did make 'em."

"Well, ma'am, I'll be sure to put the lid on the cistern," Cooley Junior assured her, "and I'll latch the gate. I sure do thank you for that, ma'am. That's awful nice of you."

MRS. WEAVER FELT A SURGE OF GRATITUDE as she grabbed her pencil and added one more act of kindness to her list of good deeds that God would examine come Judgment Day. She wanted to be certain he would hand her a crown with many stars the day those Pearly Gates swung wide for her entry.

Mrs. Weaver's breakfast nook was her sanctuary, where she read her Bible each morning, made her promises to God, and asked for more than she expected to get. She read the day's devotional in *The Upper Room* as reverently as passages in the Bible. She slipped the July 1949 issue into her Bible to mark the place of the latest scripture read.

Sitting at the table in that little room, she had a clear view of the gate where Cooley Junior would leave his bucket each morning. She appreciated he would be a reminder to pray for

the poor and the hungry. Her prayer list was so long it was impossible to remember it all. She read it to God each day, in case he forgot what was on it.

The morning after Cooley Junior's encounter with Mrs. Weaver, he left his dented, rust-spotted bucket inside the gate on his way to the Fletchers. He enjoyed working for them most of all. They were the nicest people he knew, plus Danny B was his best and only friend. One friend was enough when it was somebody like Danny B.

I THINK IT'S SUPER KEEN HOW COOLEY JUNIOR pushes the edger's spade into the ground, so carefully making the border of the rose bush bed. I crawl along behind him, picking up loose strands of Bermuda grass from his trimming and pulling weeds sprouting beneath the roses.

"You sure are tall and lanky for a 'leven-year-old." Cooley Junior doesn't slow down a stitch as we talk.

"Yeah. Makes me wish I liked to play basketball."

"And somethin' else I've wondered about." Cooley Junior has a big grin on his face.

"Yeah?"

"Those freckles you got across your nose. You wash them off at night?"

I laugh hard. "Of course I do. Why do you even ask?"

"Well, they're the same color as your hair, so I figured you prob'ly washed 'em off at night and used your hair to paint 'em back on the next day."

We're both laughing when Mother calls from the back porch. "Danny B!"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Y'all's dinner'll be ready at twelve-fifteen sharp. Check your watch and be here at the back door. Twelve-fifteen, now. That's when I'm settin' it out here on the step. If you're not here to get it, the dog will."

"Yes, ma'am." We don't have a dog. Mother says that to make her point.

One of the best things about summer is eating dinner with Cooley Junior when he's working at our house. I'm pretty sure it's better food than he gets any other time, and I like how he appreciates it.

"We're having leftovers from Sunday dinner. Roast, mashed potatoes, gravy, black-eyed peas." I know he'll like today's menu.

“I reckon that must be how they’d eat in heaven, if there was a heaven.”

“Of course there’s a heaven,” I say. Brother Price, our pastor, would call this an opportunity to witness. So I do—a little bit.

Cooley Junior grabs the handkerchief from the back pocket of his overalls and wipes sweat from his face.

“And okra.” That addition will make him real happy. “Mother’s fixing okra just for you. I don’t know how you and Daddy stand that yucky stuff. I think y’all are the only people in the world that like green globs of cow snot.”

“It makes you strong. Like Popeye.”

“That’s spinach, you dope. Popeye eats spinach.”

“Betcha anything he eats okra, too.”

We sit behind the garage to eat. As soon as we gulp the cherry Jell-O, Cooley Junior rushes to finish the rose bed. He says he has a job at the Piggly Wiggly store and wants to make sure he gets there on time.

TIBBITT IS ONE OF MANY SMALL TOWNS dotting the high plains of Texas. They are each different, yet all very much alike. They are thirty miles from their neighboring towns because that’s the distance a horse-drawn wagon could travel in one day. In 1949, they had populations of two to three thousand. Each town had at least two churches, most three and some four, if you counted the “holy rollers.” Each had one or two grocery stores, one or two drugstores, a barbershop, a beauty shop, a doctor, a dentist, a lawyer, a laundry, a dry cleaner, a post office, a movie theater, and an icehouse where you could buy ice, freeze and store the results of hunts, and get cold watermelons in the summer. But none of these towns had a saloon or liquor store, because all were in dry counties. That didn’t mean you couldn’t buy liquor there—you just had to know the wheres and whens.

Like all those little towns, Tibbitt was calm and comfortable. Life was easy and unhurried. Folks were cordial and helpful. There wasn’t a person in Tibbitt who wouldn’t claim, “Nothing ever happens here.”

“WELL, A-COURSE COOLEY JUNIOR idn’t quite the ugliest critter in town. His pathetic ol’ daddy got first prize sewed up in that there category a long time ago.”

Aunt Ludy talks about lots of things because she never stops talking. But she was bugging the heck out of me how she was

slicing the Cooleys with her sharp-tongued snipping. Lots of people around Tibbitt don't take to the Cooleys because they're poor and stay to themselves, and Cooley Junior behaves in an odd and unexpected manner sometimes. People act like they don't even know the Cooleys till they need something done that they don't want to do. Then they'll call on them. They're plenty glad to have the Cooleys around then.

Cooley Junior is my really good friend. I really like him. And I like Mr. Cooley. I never met Cooley Junior's mother, who isn't around anymore, anyway. So I don't have an opinion about her.

Before they got to be so poor, they were a little more respected. But Mr. Cooley got sick, and Cooley Junior has to support them. A lot of his money probably goes to pay for Mr. Cooley's medical bills. Cooley Junior took him to doctors in Lubbock a time or two when their truck was still working.

Once you get poor in Tibbitt, you drop to the bottom of the social scale. People with enough money to live decently like to claim it's the poor person's fault they don't have money.

Aunt Ludy grabs a handful of the gigantic dress twisted around the ironing board and yanks like she's wrangling a mad heifer. She slams the iron down and pounds on that poor dress. Mother said that Aunt Ludy didn't so much iron her clothes as she bangs 'em flat.

"But then, praise God, Cletus Cooley's got to where he stays off the streets so much nowadays." Aunt Ludy blabbers on, jamming the tip of the iron onto a blob of sweat that drops off one of her chins. "An' that's a blessin' to us all, what with that last heart attack or spasm, whatever in Sam Hill it was that twisted his ol' face like a worn-out rusty bedspring."

"He had a stroke." Mother corrects her sternly, a correction that doesn't register with Aunt Ludy. "A stroke can do unkind things to a person's appearance. But his face is not all twisted the way you make it sound. Goodness gracious."

Mother sits at the kitchen table across from me, sorting a stack of recipes she tore out of newspapers and magazines. She usually speaks with a gentle voice, though now she's sharper than usual. She doesn't like it when Aunt Ludy says stupid stuff, either.

"Oh?" The tone and shape of Aunt Ludy's one word mean it's supposed to chastise more than question. "You some kind of carterologist, are you?"

"No," Mother says, returning to her gentle voice. "I'm not a

cardiologist—nor am I a neurologist.” She sneaks in the refinement which Aunt Ludy misses completely.

Aunt Ludy deflates with a whine like an inflated balloon let loose. She puts her hands on the ironing board, leaning on it till it moans with the pain of her thrust. She releases a raspy sigh of exasperation. “Doctor whatchamacallit. You know what I mean. An’ what makes you so sure it was a stroke, anyhow?”

Mother sounds like a third-grade teacher introducing fractions. “Glenda Fields. She’s a nurse at the hospital where he was at. It was a stroke, she said. She would know. And, yes, it affected his face, but only a tiny bit. Nothin’ like the way you make it sound. It just wadn’t that bad.”

“Well,” Aunt Ludy snarls, “he got uglier. You cain’t tell me he didn’t.” Then, she delivers her more specific conclusion. “If you ask me”—nobody did— “that stroke or whatever it was wadn’t so much caused by some kind of health condition near as much as it resulted from his vile spiritual condition. That ol’ man’s rotten soul is lost an’ headed for hell. I tell you that for sure. Why, when was the last time him an’ that ignernt boy of his went to church? Huh? If ever they did. Yes siree, God is punishin’ that worthless ol’ reprobate for the wicked life he’s been leadin’ for all-a these years.”

Wow! How the heck did she come up with all that witless stuff? Mr. Cooley has lived in Tibbitt since before I was born, and I never heard anything about him doing anything wrong.

Aunt Ludy makes stuff up. Facts don’t matter to her when she runs off at the mouth. She gets a thrill out of saying stupid stuff.

I know the Cooleys don’t go to church because they don’t want to. But even if they wanted to, there isn’t a church in town that would welcome poor people who don’t have the proper Sunday clothes.

WHEN AUNT LUDY COMES TO OUR HOUSE to iron, she expects an audience. Mother tried, a long time ago, to do her household chores when Aunt Ludy came over. But Aunt Ludy screamed her side of a conversation so loud people could hear it a block away. Mother figures it’s more peaceful for the entire neighborhood if she piddles around in the kitchen with Aunt Ludy till she goes home. That’s why Mother does her recipe sorting on Tuesdays. It’s something to do while Aunt Ludy flaps her lips.

Aunt Ludy puts two baskets of sprinkled laundry in her car

every Tuesday and drives the block and a half to our house. Mother doesn't like Aunt Ludy coming over like this. But Mother would never tell her that. Aunt Ludy is family, after all—but only by marriage. She's the wife of Uncle Floyd, Daddy's younger brother. Still, family matters, even annoying parts of it. That's what my Mother and Daddy taught me.

Aunt Ludy doesn't have anybody to talk to at her house during the day except a bright yellow canary named Chipper. He's an excited little blabbermouth. I call him Chipper the Chirper, which Aunt Ludy doesn't like. The two of them sometimes try to out-jabber each other.

I don't think Aunt Ludy and Uncle Floyd talk to each other much. They never had kids, so it's just them at their house—and Chipper the Chirper.

Because I'm just an eleven-year-old kid, I'm not supposed to say much of anything to adults, because grownups know so much more, they tell me. But I am miffed and want to say something to Aunt Ludy, because all that stuff she is yakking about the Cooleys is nothing but a bunch of pure-dee bull pucky (excuse my language).

I've seen Mr. Cooley since he was in the hospital, and his face isn't all twisted. His mouth droops a little bit on one side, but that's not very noticeable. He looks nothing like what Aunt Ludy says.

I can't, for the life of me, figure out what gets her so fired up about the Cooleys. Mr. Cooley was a jack-of-all-trades and a good one before he took ill. He did all kinds of odd jobs—went all over the county to do them. What put that burr under Aunt Ludy's blanket beats the heck out of me.

She sets the iron on the board, jams her fists into her back, and does a twisty-wiggle thing while making sounds like a pig poked with a prod. Her back is always hurting, she complains. She whines about dozens of terrible pains, but her back is the cross God gave her to bear, she says.

Daddy said his cross is having to listen to her complain about her cross. "Many cross-es," Mother corrected with a grunt and a grin. "She's got a ton of 'em."

Daddy grinned in agreement. "I'm perty sure the back of her wouldn't hurt so much if she didn't have all that belly in front to haul around."

"Daniel!" Mother intended to gently reprimand, but her giggle destroyed that possibility.

Aunt Ludy's favorite hobbies are complaining and eating. I'd rather read and write. I even like to read the dictionary. I've found lots of words that describe Aunt Ludy very well.

Mother and Daddy don't know I can hear them talk about so much stuff like they do sometimes. They tell me not to talk about people. But since they do it, I figure it's okay to think that way. After all, I'll be a grownup someday, and I need to know the language.

"Poor Floyd," Daddy said a while back. "He was the brightest and most promisin' of us Fletcher boys." The three Fletcher brothers are about two years apart in age. "Put Marvin an' me to shame with his brain and ambition. He had a bit of a wild streak in him for a while, but he was gettin' over that. Then, with no reason whatsoever, he up an' marries Ludelle Seeger—last of Fanny Seeger's girls to get married. Full three years older than Floyd. What he ever saw in her..." He shook his head with a quiet "Tsk, tsk."

"Love has a strange way," Mother said.

"Love?" Daddy snorted. "I don't think it was Cupid's arrow that he got shot with. Whatever it was, it knocked the wind right out of his sails, like she plumb dried him up inside. Maybe she put a spell on him. You reckon? A hex?" He made a sound that was almost a snicker.

"Now, Daniel, don't be talkin' like that."

Daddy went on with his reckoning. "Floyd was a good boy—laughed a lot, fun to be with. I cain't remember now the last time I heard him laugh. That's a dadgum shame. And he was the good-lookin' one. Why, he could've had any girl in the county—that smile he had, those perty blue eyes. I'm not sure his eyes are even blue anymore."

Mother spoke lightly. "He couldn't've had just any girl." Daddy chuckled as Mother tittered. "You know I liked your smile."

It was Daddy's turn to snicker. "Let's not be gettin' silly, now, Leona." His voice was softer—more like an organ played than words spoken.

It's funny how I know about some of Mother and Daddy's private conversations. One big closet connects our bedrooms, and sometimes I crawl in and listen. Their closet door is usually open, so I hear everything when I'm in there. Sometimes I even get where I can see them. I don't go in the closet often because it's almost like spying, and that might be a sin of some kind.

AUNT LUDY ISN'T READY to let go of the Cooleys. If she were a dog, she'd grab hold of a britches' leg and hang on till thunder cracked.

Aunt Ludy waves the iron around like a baton. She thinks that helps make a point. "Them Cooleys—not a single one of 'em ever 'mounted to a hill of beans. You know, Leona, God put some people on this earth for no reason but to be blights. That's a fact. They're just here to test the rest of us. Like blow flies an' boll weevils. Yessiree, blights! We're all sinful creatures—that's what the word of God tells us, dudn't it?—so we get what we deserve. No doubt in the world about that. Afflictions. Plagues. That's God's way—even if we don't understand it—an' 'most the time I don't. But people like them Cooleys? Yep, God puts 'em here for us to have to deal with. Puts 'em here to test us. Goodniss gracious. Havin' to deal with that nasty kind."

Where she comes up with those brainless ideas beats the pee-waddling out of me. Mother is as annoyed as I am, but she won't say anything that would cause a dispute, which is easy with Aunt Ludy—and endless.

She claws into her clothes basket and captures another enormous dress. It's a dark blue tent-like thing with big white flowers that makes her look like an angry rainstorm when she has that thing on. The way she bounces and wiggles makes me think I'm hearing thunder.

She clomps over to the refrigerator. Shabby old house slippers are the only shoes she wears on a Tuesday, and one of those has escaped and crawled away.

She refills her glass from a pitcher of sweet tea she made for herself and never offers to share, though she made it with our tea, our sugar, and our water, and put it in our pitcher and our refrigerator.

"First, them three daughters—and all of 'em tarts, you ask me. Then his first wife—ugly as sin, that tiny little thing. She ups an' dies, an' did you know she wadn't hardly a size four? Nothin' to her, really. Then he marries again. One look and you could tell she was nothin' more'n a floozy. Can you 'magine? She worked as a butcher! At that fancy new grocery store over in Post, of all things. No decent woman makes a livin' whackin' meat. But them two rarities take a likin' to each other, get hitched, then they curse the world with scrawny little ol' Cletus Cooley Junior. Like we needed more of that kind of dreck in this town."

ON HIS WAY TO PIGGLY WIGGLY, Cooley Junior traipsed back and forth at the corner of First Baptist Church, looking at the lawn, the hedges, the flower beds. Nobody was taking proper care of the property. He wished he could look closer at a bed where petunias were struggling among the ragweed. But he would never set foot on that sacred corner lot without permission.

A year ago, in front of the post office, Cooley Junior approached the man who was pastor at the time and asked if he could be their gardener. The man sneered and delivered his sermon for the day. "Fine Christian people take care of God's house. Heathens don't do the work of the Lord." Cooley Junior hoped the new pastor would consider letting a heathen make the grounds around God's house look a little more divine.

"COOLEY JUNIOR WADN'T EVEN CUTE as a baby." Aunt Ludy is bashing that poor, helpless dress with the hot iron and Cooley Junior with her loose tongue. "That just plain ol' idn't normal."

"You reckon maybe he was a changeling?" Oops! Mother's giving me her stop-it-now look. Aunt Ludy jerks her head toward me like a hungry owl spotting skittering mice, then flicks her eyes wide open like she just saw a drunkard's prayer answered.

Very few ugly babies have ever been born. I doubt if Cooley Junior was one of them.

TWELVEMINUTESBEFORETWO O'CLOCK, Cooley Junior entered the Piggly Wiggly store. He saw Mr. Holmes stacking cans of Libby's fruit cocktail on a shelf and walked over to him.

"I'm here, Mr. Holmes, sir. I'll get right to work." Saying nothing more, awaiting no response, he started toward the back of the store and the storeroom.

Roland Holmes spoke, stopping him. "Hey, Cooley Junior."

"Yes, sir?" Cooley Junior turned back, expecting his boss to chastise him for something. He didn't know what, but people treated him that way a lot. He knew he did good work, yet people often talked unkindly to him.

Mr. Holmes smiled. "Just wanted to tell you what a good job you're doin' back there."

"Oh. Thank you, sir." His smile stretched across his face.

"You're gettin' that done in half the time I thought it'd take. Ever'thing is awful neat. You're doin' a great job."

"That's what I'm supposed to do, idn't it? A good job?"

Holmes chuckled. "I wish ever'body 'round here had that

kind of gumption.”

Moments passed, the two smiling at each other. Then Cooley Junior said, “I’ll get right to work.”

Roland Holmes reached to take two more cans, stick on price labels, and stack them on the shelf.

Cooley Junior turned back to his boss. “Mr. Holmes, sir, is that other fella here?”

“Who? Oh, you mean Joe Don? No. He’s supposed to be here at two, which it just about is. But I’d die of amazement if he was to show up on time. Why you askin’?”

“Just wonderin’ is all.” Cooley Junior turned and continued on his way to the storeroom. Within seconds, he had a crowbar in hand and was attacking sagging ancient planks, flaking away a dozen coats of paint, revealing a stack of different colors going back decades.

Fifteen minutes later he heard Joe Don on the other side of the door arguing with Mr. Holmes. “You’re damned clock is ten five minutes fast,” he ranted. “I have arrived here at my fuckin’ prestigious job on fuckin’ time!”

The door to the storeroom flew open. Joe Don stomped in and grabbed his apron from a hook. “That goddamned fuckin’ ass hole,” he muttered, then he looked at Cooley Junior with a hard grimace. “Oh, shit, the town’s fuckin’ retard is back.” He lunged out of the room, slamming the door behind him.