

UNEXPECTED KNOCK
by Diane M. Dresback (© 9/11/14)

Jill sat in the torn seat of her seven year old faded blue Corolla. She had saved all the earnings from adolescent jobs to be able to purchase it when she graduated from high school. It used to smell and look brand new when she had faithfully washed it at least monthly for the first four years. But after Jill had accepted a position in a popular and busy chain restaurant as a bartender, the thought of spending her precious time off vacuuming seats and scrubbing tires became less important.

The piece of paper she held in her hand consisted of a name and an address. The paper had been unfolded and refolded numerous times over the past few days. Jill refolded it once again and tossed it into the ashtray. As it landed, a few dry ashes floated up into the air.

She emerged from her car readjusting her ripped jeans and black short sleeved tee shirt. The tattooed artwork covering her left arm was almost fully exposed. Habitually her index finger ran across the sharp prongs from the earrings protruding along the back of her ear. As she walked up the pathway to the nice middle-class home, she observed the freshly painted white picket fence, expertly manicured green grass and bright welcoming flowerbeds. Her life hadn't been so perfect, but she'd survived.

On the back window of the minivan parked in the driveway were those familiar stickers indicating a happy exemplary family. Stick figures of dad, mom, daughter, son and, of course, the dog. Jill wondered how her stick figure family might be displayed on a rear window. Mom with facial bruises, mom's boyfriend with a bottle in his hand, brother behind bars, and a tattooed and body pierced daughter. A perfectly dysfunctional family.

Jill knocked on the front door. There was an artsy hand made plaque above the door, 'Home Is Where The Heart Is.'

The door finally opened revealing a pretty and fashionably dressed girl. Jill figured her to be maybe 15 or 16 years old. Must be the stick figure daughter, Jill thought.

"Hi," the girl said cheerfully.

"Hi," replied Jill. "I'd like to speak with Lisa Murray."

"Sorry, she's not here right now."

"When will she be home?"

"Not for a little bit. Do you know her?" the girl inquired.

Jill shook her head. "My mother went to school with her."

The girl's face broke into a pleasant smile. "I was going to say that Murray was her maiden name. My name is Naomi. I'm her daughter." She extended her arm and they shook hands.

"Jill. I guess I'll come back later. Thanks." She turned to walk away.

"No, hang on. Why don't you just come in and wait," she invited. "It shouldn't be too long." With that she stepped back and pulled the door open wide.

Jill nodded and entered the house. "Thanks."

Naomi led Jill into a nicely decorated living room with a brown leather couch and a matching recliner. Freshly cut flowers were arranged carefully in a vase set on the

large glass coffee table. The inside of the home looked as perfect as the outside. And the stickers were probably a good representation of the family living there, thought Jill.

“So, did your mom go to high school or college with my mom?” asked Naomi friendly.

“High school.”

“Oh, she talks more about college than high school. You want something to drink? We’ve got like pretty much anything.” Naomi leaned in and spoke more quietly, “Even got a couple of beers in there. My dad drinks those once in a while!” She giggled out loud.

Jill smiled politely thinking to herself perhaps she had been mistaken. Surely that family was dysfunctional as well because Naomi’s dad had a beer on Saturday nights.

“Cool tattoos,” murmured Naomi examining Jill’s arm. “My mom would never let me get one. She doesn’t get that some people think of them as art. I bet it hurt.”

“Yeah,” responded Jill. “They hurt like hell but it was worth it. I’m thinking of getting one on my calf next time.”

Grimacing, Naomi raised her eyebrows. “Wow. So, did you want something to drink?”

“No, I’m fine thanks. How old are you?”

“Just turned 17,” replied Naomi. “My brother Zach is 15.”

There was a sudden crash in the other room and she rolled her eyes. “That’s probably him now. He’s such a klutz.”

Zach entered the room. He wore a green and white baseball uniform. His shoes slung over his shoulder tied together by their laces. Dirt on the side of his pant leg made it obvious he had been sliding into base. His dark hair was wet with sweat.

“Where’s mom?” Zach questioned. Then looked at Jill, “Hey.”

Jill responded to his hey with a “hey” of her own.

“Mom isn’t home, yet.”

There’s a yell from another room. “Zach, get your stuff off the table before your mother gets here.” Zach rolled his eyes and turned to leave as a man walked into the room continuing to chide him. “I mean now.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m going,” replied the boy feeling slightly embarrassed. He disappeared to follow his father’s orders.

The man was surprised to see Jill standing there. She could feel him make a quick and judgmental glance at her arm before his polite greeting. “Hello, I’m Rich. Naomi and Zach’s father.”

To Jill, Rich seemed like the typical dad. The kind that her coworkers made fun of when they came into the restaurant as their wives shopped at the nearby mall. They’d cozy up to the bar and order Bud Lights and eat peanuts. The type of man that she had wished her mother had been interested in. Someone decent and normal. Not too tall, not too short. Not too heavy, not too skinny. Not too aggressive, not too passive. Average looking with kind eyes and a welcoming grin.

“Dad, this is Jill,” responded Naomi. “Jill’s mom went to high school with mom.”

Rich laughed, “A blast from the past, huh? Did my wife know you were coming?”

“No,” answered Jill. “It’s a surprise.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be much longer. I’m sure she’ll be happy to meet you. I hope your mom is alright and you’re not bearing bad news.”

Jill shook her head, “No bad news.”

“Good then.”

Without warning, Naomi threw her hands up. “Oh Dad. I keep forgetting. You need to sign a couple graduation papers for me.”

“Sure. Excuse us, Jill.” Jill nodded as Naomi and Rich left her alone.

While waiting she examined all the family photographs displayed around the room. She brushed her hand across the handmade quilt draped across the back of the couch. As she turned over a porcelain angel figurine in her hand, a phone rang in the background. She put the breakable angel back down balancing it gently on its porcelain bench.

Moments later, Rich reappeared. “Jill, that was Lisa. She said she’s running a few minutes behind and for us to go ahead and start dinner. So come on and eat with us. I didn’t spoil your surprise.”

“Thanks, but I can come back later.”

But he insisted, refusing to accept no for an answer. “Come on. Don’t be shy. Besides, we’re having homemade potato soup. It’s been simmering in the crockpot all day.”

“That sounds delicious,” responded Jill genuinely. She hadn’t eaten since early that morning when she had managed to push down a two day old donut.

She followed Rich into the kitchen where Naomi and Zach had already served themselves. He motioned for her to go next. She took a brimming ladle full of the chunky creamy soup. The steam rose as she added fresh bacon bits and onions from the nearby crystal dishes.

Carrying her bowl to the table, she sat next to Naomi who beamed at her. “It’s really good,” she whispered. “My dad’s an expert with the crockpot.”

Rich sat down. He and his children bowed their heads and he began to pray. Jill followed suit, lowering her head and folding her hands in her lap like she imagined she was supposed to. This was something she had only seen in movies and with one friend she had had back in grade school. It had always made her feel uncomfortable but now she felt a strange sense of warmth. These people were kind. They were an ordinary family. One that she had never had.

“God, thank you for this food and also for Jill, our special guest tonight. Bless this food to our bodies and give us the strength to do Your will. Amen.”

Unsure if she should say something because Rich had mentioned her name in the prayer, Jill just picked up her spoon and began to eat.

As the meal went on, Jill listened to the family chat back and forth. Conversation that most people would have thought as mundane and boring. But to Jill, it was refreshing. She couldn’t remember the last meal spent at a kitchen table with anyone in her family. For years she had simply brought food home from the restaurants she worked at and ate alone watching silly reruns on a flickering old television.

“Zach, what time’s your game this Thursday?” asked Rich.

“Two-thirty.”

“Is it a home game?”

“No, it’s at Richmond.”

Naomi chimed in. “You can kiss that one goodbye.”

“Hey,” exclaimed Zach.

“It’s true,” ensured his wise sister. “They’re undefeated the past two seasons.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” sneered Zach.

“What position do you play?” asked Jill just as she made an accidental slurping noise. “Sorry.” Rich and Naomi smiled.

“Catcher,” Zach replied. “You like baseball?” Jill shrugged. She honestly was just trying to find a way to be a part of the conversation.

“You should come to the game,” he said enthusiastically. “Junior Varsity ball doesn’t have much of a fan base.”

Without warning there was a thud from grocery bags being set down onto the kitchen counter. It was Lisa. Without looking at the family, she apologized. “Sorry I’m late. I’m so frustrated at that drug store. Rich, the doctor still won’t approve your medication...”

Naomi rolled her eyes at Jill indicating that her mother was oblivious to her presence.

Lisa continued, “You need to call your doctor tomorrow and find out what the problem is. It probably has to do with the new insurance rules...” She went on talking as she put items away in the cupboards.

Jill had stopped eating and was watching Lisa. She was shorter than what her mother had described and was heavier. Her hair was pulled back in a silver clip. Her green eyes intense as she shared her disappointments of the day.

Suddenly, Lisa fell silent when she noticed Jill at the table with her family. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize we had a guest.” She approached the table and stood next to her daughter. “I’m Naomi’s mom. I haven’t met you before.”

Jill simply stared at her. Naomi put her arm around her mother’s waist and grinned. “Surprise!” Confused, Lisa furrowed her brow and tilted her head. “This is Jill. You knew her mom,” blurted out Naomi.

Frowning and putting her hand to her mouth, Lisa gave a blank look at Jill trying to figure out who she was.

Naomi groaned, “Oops, sorry. I guess you wanted to tell her yourself.”

“Tell me what?” asked Lisa. Jill maintained eye-contact with her. By this time the rest of the family had ceased eating sensing some awkwardness. “I’m sorry, Jill. Have I met you before?”

“A long time ago,” answered Jill quietly.

Lisa nodded still puzzled. “Oh. And who’s your mom?”

“Rebecca Williams.”

Naomi watched her mother’s face awaiting a happy reaction. Lisa stared momentarily at Jill without smiling. Then unexpectedly returned to the counter to retrieve a loaf of bread from a grocery bag and put it away. “I remember, Rebecca,” Lisa stated nonchalantly. “Is she doing well?”

“Haven’t seen her in seven years.”

Everyone looked at Jill except for Lisa.

“Seven years?” remarked Zach. “You guys must have had one major fight.”

“That’s none of our business, Zachary,” Rich commented sternly.

As Lisa goes about putting eggs, butter and apples in the refrigerator, Naomi’s curiosity persisted. “Mom, so were you and Jill’s mom cheerleaders, together? Was she on the squad when you guys won all those awards?”

There was a long silence. Jill could feel her heart beating in her chest as her breathing grew more erratic.

“Mom. What’s going on?” asked Naomi.

Lisa shoved a package of organic chicken breasts into the freezer. “I have no idea.”

Jill jumped up unable to control her anger any longer. “I knew you’d be this way!” she yelled out. Rich, Zach and Naomi were dumbfounded as they tried to understand what was happening.

“Look, your mother and I just didn’t get along,” Lisa said coldly.

“Yeah, you just took off,” Jill spat out.

Lisa shook her head. “That was a long time ago. Friends have arguments.”

“It was way beyond an argument.”

Lisa exhaled and turned to her family, “Can you give us some privacy?” Rich nodded and started to motion Naomi and Zach out of the room.

But Jill objected, “No. Your family needs to know the truth.”

“Stop it, Jill,” protested Lisa. “This has nothing to do with them.”

Jill couldn’t believe what was happening. “It has everything to do with them. Obviously you’ve been lying to them for years. Playing the perfect little wife with the perfect little family.”

Rich stood up, “What is this all about?” he demanded.

Visibly upset, Lisa turned to Jill. “You need to leave now.”

“Afraid I’m going to blow some big secret? Upset some fragile fabrication?” Jill responded spitefully.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” rebutted Lisa. “I want you to leave my home.”

But Jill did not back down, “I know everything.”

Naomi insisted, “What do you know?”

Frustrated, Lisa turned to her daughter, “It doesn’t matter.”

There was a moment when no one spoke but things were quickly becoming evident to Rich as the tension increased.

Jill was experiencing a rejection she had long feared. Sarcasm permeated her tone. “Either you tell them or I will.”

Lisa and Jill locked eyes. Lisa tried to gather her thoughts but there was no easy way to disclose this long held secret. One she had tried to forget but never quite could. She looked directly at her husband. “Jill is my first daughter.”

A gasp came from Naomi.

“What?” escaped from Zach.

Jill looked at Naomi and Zach. “Sorry I ruined your mother’s perfect little charade. Guess you know now that she wasn’t as innocent as she led on to be.”

A thoughtful look came across Rich’s face as he finally turned away from his wife and back to Jill. “Jill, what exactly do you want?”

That question infuriated her. “It figures you’d think it was about money. Yeah, pay me off so no one else finds out about your ‘little sin’. But now at least you have to face it.”

“Stop it!” screamed Lisa.

But Jill was relentless in pushing her years of hurt upon Lisa, her mother, the one who hadn't cared enough to keep her. The one that had forced another classmate to take her to save the embarrassment. The one that had made Jill live an unbearable childhood. "Don't want your family to know all the dirty details of your past?" bit Jill.

"Mom, why didn't you tell us?" pleaded Naomi.

Trying to regain some adult composure, Lisa spoke quietly. "None of you could understand."

"That's not true," disputed Naomi.

"Yes it is," Lisa argued. "That's like saying, it's okay to go out and do what I did."

Becoming upset herself, Naomi retorted, "At least you could have been honest. Here you expect me to be all perfect and everything...like you...and then--"

"That's enough," interrupted Rich. "Let's just settle down and think this through."

"There isn't anything to think through. I got pregnant and left the child with Rebecca," Lisa divulged as she looked to the floor.

"Didn't Grandma know?" asked Zach.

"She was so ashamed. I told her that Rebecca would take the child and that was good enough for her and we up and moved. She took the secret to her grave." Lisa looked back at Jill. "Rebecca was not to tell. She promised me."

"How could you be so cold?" Jill asked.

"I was 15."

"Who is my father?"

Lisa hesitated, closed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know."

Naomi's hand flew to her mouth. Zach looked at his cold, half-eaten potato soup. Rich rubbed his forehead.

Lisa broke the growing silence by sarcastically asking Jill, "Are you happy now? Did you accomplish what you came for?"

Jill paused then quietly replied. "I suppose." She turned to Naomi, Zach and Rich. Guilt was beginning to creep in. How could she hurt these people that had been so nice to her? Had let her into their home, invited her to share a meal with them and even prayed for her? This had not gone as she had wanted. But why not ruin the life of the one who had ruined hers?

"Sorry to spoil your dinner," Jill apologized. "The soup *was* delicious." Then she turned and left.

The family remained motionless without uttering a word as they listened to the front door open and close.

"I can't believe you lied to us!" exclaimed Naomi.

"It had nothing to do with this family," defended Lisa.

"How can you say that?" her daughter stormed out of the room.

Rich slowly approached his wife attempting to put his arm around her shoulder despite not understanding why she had lied to him as well. But instead of allowing him to comfort her, she pushed him away and ran to the front door. Lisa saw only a glimpse of her first born driving away, a big trail of exhaust following after her Corolla.

Lisa's eyes filled with tears. She knew she had made mistakes in her past. Who hadn't? But somewhere along the way she felt she had begun to make things better. All the hard work of raising two responsible children. Children that were unlike she had been. Now her sordid past had come back to expose itself so horribly.

Her husband came up behind her and watched the car turn the corner. “We all try to make the best decisions we can under the circumstances,” he said soothingly. “We have to remember that.”

Her head dropped forward, her chin almost resting on her chest. She saw a piece of paper protruding from under the door mat. With trembling hands, she picked it up and unfolded it. The paper contained a phone number. Lisa held the paper to her heart, turned to Rich, and sobbed on his shoulder.

THE END