

*Phil Robbins*  
**The Visit**

I got out of bed that morning as I had for so many before, cataloguing a list of aches, sorting them into old friends and unwanted guests, hoping the latter would not become too familiar. I didn't need to check the time, though I knew Lizzie would be impatient with me if I wasn't ready when she got here. My body woke up when it did, slept when it could, and it had been years since I ever thought of a clock as being anything other than a part of the furniture. Besides, I hadn't slept past six since the accident and that left me at least three hours to kill before Lizzie got here. And how much, really, was there to do? Dress, straighten up, shave, and breakfast. How long could that take?

I looked at myself in the mirror, lathering my face with the brush my father had given me decades ago, before I went off to school. It was the only thing of his I still had, and its softened bristles were more familiar to me than the face that stared back at me, seeming to add lines each night while I slept. The blade pulled at stubble that had overstayed its welcome. Angie had always been more attentive to it than I, hating the feel of it against her forehead while she lay on my shoulder at night or when she reached for a kiss on her way to work. I still did it for her. Our monthly visits also gave reason to shed my two worn flannel shirts and khakis for something more "presentable," as she used to chastise, and apply gel to my remaining hair. Satisfied that she would be pleased, I smoothed out my side of the bed and went down for breakfast.

Two hard-boiled eggs, white toast with more butter than Angie would have permitted, and the headlines on the Gazette later, Lizzie walked in, never one to announce her arrival with a knock or ring. I looked up as she opened the fridge and drank orange juice from the bottle. She scanned the contents of the refrigerator and quickly opened the pantry doors.

"We still have some time until they let in visitors. Want eggs?" I asked.

"Don't bother. I'll grab something later. I've been wanting to lose a few pounds, anyway."

Lizzie had her father's athletic frame and couldn't put on losable pounds if she tried. There had always been something that Lizzie needed to fix about herself. Most of her attention had been directed toward superficial adjustments she could make—hair style, weight, clothing. No amount of reassurance from Angie and me had ever been convincing. Lizzie typically bristled in response, lecturing us about how people of "your generation" couldn't possibly understand the pressures she and her peers experienced these days. "If you're not clickbait, then you're in trouble," she instructed us. Her latest adjustment was several streaks of pastel hair color.

"Is that green or turquoise?" I asked, regretting the question as soon as I said it.

"Really, Dad? You're gonna start in on me that fast? It's been like, what, fifteen seconds since I walked in?" she asked, holding out her watchless wrist as if to emphasize the question.

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"Sorry, you know, I just always want you to look your best when we visit. Mama always loved when you dressed up. 'My little Cosmo girl,' she used to call you."

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Dad, that was when I was like eight, and I have never exactly been Cosmo material. Besides, it's not like she's gonna notice it now, much less comment on it."

"I'm not so sure," I said, but there was no point in arguing with her. Lizzie had been the family debate champ since she could talk, which was about the time her grandmother and I became her parents. Her mom had left her to chase some man other than our son, who had left them both to chase the dragon. Angie and I had long ago ceded authority to her in most matters, shouldering others' guilt and naively assuming one day we'd be repaid. That Lizzie still agreed to be my monthly designated driver was her only obvious concession to me, and perhaps her Mama as well.

"Did you remember the flowers?" I asked.

"Yes. Cost fifteen dollars. You think it makes a difference? They just wilt and someone throws them out."

I still believed she could notice them but kept that to myself. Handing her a twenty, I said, "Use the rest for gas."

I stood and gathered my few things. I had become a bit of a pack rat in the past several months, holding onto things that seemed to matter to me and carrying them around, never knowing when they might be needed, or lost. I took my time walking to the door, glancing around without purpose.

"Are you limping?" Lizzie asked. "You remembered your pills, right? I'm strong but I can't help you that much, especially if you fall again."

"They just make me nod off. I'll be fine once the juices start to flow a bit. I hate to drift off when we visit."

I glanced in the rear seat as I side-shuffled into the car, taking in the scraps of my little girl's life, curious about the stories that each told. How I wanted to hold them all up and have her tell me about each. Why was there an empty Happy Meal container? Did she go to the movies alone? Why was there a wrench and screwdriver on the floor? I kept the questions to myself, anticipating that they would not be welcome. When had my curiosity become a cross-examination to her? I wondered. Had she always felt that or was it just another unwanted guest who had arrived since that night in December? We sat in silence for the drive, intimate strangers without a script.

Lizzie turned through the gates and drove under the canopied elms and maples. She parked and came around to help me, although I was halfway out the door as she got to my side, determined to show her that I was not as feeble as she thought. We walked to where Angie rested, Lizzie taking my hand without my needing assistance. It was a gesture that took place the first Sunday of each of the past six months (and nine days, actually), and it reminded me of how things once were.

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Lizzie gave her Mama the flowers, laying them at her side, and joined me on the bench. She leaned her head on my shoulder the way she used to when I read to her.

"You think she knows we're here?" Lizzie asked.

"I do." I put my arm around her shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze.

"You really believe that?"

I turned to look at my daughter, my granddaughter, and nodded.

"I miss her," Lizzie said. "Everything was so much clearer once you talked to her. She didn't even have to say anything. It was like I would just blab something, she would nod a bit, maybe ask a question or two, and remind me to do what I thought was best. I don't know if I can actually even remember a time that she told me what she thought I should do. She just trusted me to make the right decision and I would. Now how do I know what to do?"

"How did you know then?" I asked.

"I didn't. I just decided."

"Well, then, there you go," I said, trying to offer some wisdom but wondering if it was only trite.

"We should visit more," Lizzie said.

"I'd like that," I said. "A lot. She would too, I'm sure."

Lizzie looked at me, turning away from the site. She smiled and asked, "You really believe that?"