

Opal's Story, a Novel Sample Chapter

Jordanville, 1948

SHE GASPED. THE SIDE of his face was gone. Opal couldn't be sure it was her husband. Her mouth went dry and her head was suddenly heavy, drifting forward. Her hair fell over her face, the shampoo fragrance briefly overpowering the odors of the morgue. She lifted her arm, letting her pocket book slide to her elbow, so she could lift her hair from her face and tilt it up into the fluorescent light. Opal was suddenly cold, but sweat formed on her forehead and lip. She noticed blank spots in her vision. Noises down the hall echoed, loud reverberations, while there was a deafening quiet in her immediate surroundings.

Jimmy Dale held her around her waist, supporting her as she stood, swaying with nausea. She recognized the birthmark just below Ray's elbow on his left arm. It was him: the clothing, shoes, watch. There was a mole above his navel. That was enough, all she needed to know . . . it was him, him. Opal couldn't bring herself to look at Billy Mack. She would not look at her brother, could not.

Jimmy Dale took her to the hallway and encouraged her to sit, while he followed the attendant back into the morgue to identify their brother. Opal sat on the metal bench, fighting the nausea and the urge to vomit. She wanted to get a drink from the water cooler, but she didn't trust herself to take the few steps to get there. She waited. Seemed she'd been waiting. Her mother, Ida, was home with Little Ray, waiting. There would be another emotional conversation, letting Ida know her son and her son-in-law were dead. Jimmy and Opal would go home to their mother, Jimmy's wife Marlene, and Opal's infant Little Ray and give them the news.

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Abilene, 2008

The light flickered on, door opening slowly, and a young woman in scrubs put a tray covered with plastic wrap on the rolling bed table, pushing it toward Opal. "Good morning," Ms. Scrubs

said, as she pushed the wheeled table toward the bed. “I suppose this will be your final gourmet breakfast before discharge. Eat it while it’s warm. That stuff can get a little gummy the longer it sits.”

Opal squinted against the harsh light, shielding her eyes with her right hand – the one free of the tape and needle. Ms. Scrubs had no further duty than to greet her with advice and exit. Opal was still groggy with sleep. Why did this thirty-something, perky person think she knew more about oatmeal than a seasoned seventy-something? These were the little things that were irritating . . . It would wear a person out – the irritations that came with age. Opal had been dreaming, the same dream – the one where she and Jimmy Dale went to the morgue and viewed the bodies. She could still smell the place, hear the echoing of doors and footfalls in the windowless rooms.

Opal sat on the side of the metal bed in the small, sterile hospital room. She hoped it was sterile. She’d heard stories about these places. Opal wanted to leave, not wanting to spend any more time than was necessary within the resonating walls. It was neither comfortable, quiet, nor warm. It lacked atmosphere – definitely not a place she wanted to spend the last days, weeks, months of her life. She had that dream in the early morning. She saw herself with Jimmy Dale at the morgue. It reminded her she had a life before the past fifty years, a life she tried to forget. Those early morning dreams were always the worst, frantic attempts at regaining something she’d lost. It kept coming back to her, that nightmare of her life.

Sliding to the cold linoleum floor, Opal eased her feet into her white terrycloth slippers and made her way into the fluorescent-lit bathroom. She stared at her face in the mirror. She considered trying to apply lipstick, but she decided it would only look like smears of color on gray skin. *Who advises these people on this lighting? Surely this isn’t the way I really look; this color is all wrong. My hair isn’t even the right shade of mousy gray. My eyes are dull. They should put rose colored lights in here, give someone a reason to crawl out of the bed and urinate. That’s all they’ve hounded me about since I’ve been in here. “Mrs. Evans, have you urinated, honey?” Hell no, I haven’t urinated. I don’t want to catch a glimpse of myself in that God-awful bathroom mirror, sweetie. Change the light and I’ll give you urine and a bowel movement. What am I thinking? This is insane. I suppose I’ll start losing my mind a little as I get closer to the end. That could be a relief, losing my mind, losing those dreams, losing those memories. Maybe all I’d have is those memories. I’ve heard about that happening, people just remember the early*

years, the distant past, not what happened yesterday. I hope my mind takes me to 1945 and keeps me there. Certainly don't go past 1945, maybe a little of 1946, but no further.

Opal's doctor soon made his morning rounds. She was glad he'd come and gone. He signed the release for her to go home and chatted with her, telling her the cancer was back, inoperable and she would have maybe a year. There were pain killers that could manage any discomfort, but further treatment was not advised. He told her all that as she stared at a bowl of cool, half-eaten oatmeal and a plastic cup of fruit cocktail. She was glad Jimmy Dale and Harold Joe were running late. They missed the adios speech. She could decide later if she wanted to tell them there would be no more regular visits to the hospital. There would be one more visit to remove the stitches and then she would be free—free to curl up and die in a warm bed, under ambient lighting after drinking a decent cup of coffee. *My, I have turned into a sarcastic old woman. That has been one of my goals, to be able to live long enough to get away with saying exactly what I think. It isn't becoming on a young person, but the ill elderly can get away with it. Bless our hearts.*

She was dressed, seated on the stiff leather chair in the room, her small bag packed and ready. Her brothers would arrive, anxious to get her loaded in Harold's truck and back to her small cottage, where she could tend her cat and wait. Of course these people would insist on the wheel chair escort out of the building. They always did. She would be grateful for that today. There was a little swift pain, making her gasp every few steps. She would be glad to be home, where she could move freely in her own surroundings, gasp and cry when she felt like doing so. That's where she would talk with Harold and Jimmy about the prognosis, a better atmosphere.

"Good morning," Harold said, pushing the door open and peeking in the room. "Are you ready to head to the house?"

"Good morning to you," Opal replied. "I sure am. Ready to blow this joint and be able to make myself a decent cup of coffee. There's no rest for the weary in this place, and I swear they tell jokes down at that nurses' station all night long. If they're not doing that, they're heading down here to poke me with a thermometer and blood pressure deal the minute I fall asleep. I'm ready to curl up with Burt Reynolds and take a long nap."

"You sound like you're feeling pretty feisty," Jimmy Dale said, following Harold into the room. "You should explain to the group of doctors standing in the hall that Burt Reynolds is your cat."

“I don’t have to explain anything, Jimmy Dale. Let them think what they want. That girl wanted to know when you arrived, so they can bring the wheel chair. I’ll ring her on this button,” Opal said. “All I have is this little bag and that plant there. Marlene took the other arrangements yesterday afternoon. She offered to take them by the house for me. She’s a doll, Jimmy Dale. You did good getting me that sister.”

They heard the clanking wheel chair coming down the hall, and shortly, there was an orderly in scrubs, “Transportation” written across his back, standing at the door. Opal looked up at his face after glancing at the wheel chair.

“Reggie?” Opal said. “Reggie Cannon?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Reggie responded. “Ms. Evans, I didn’t know you’d be the one riding in my chariot. I always like to see people leave this place. Don’t you think it’s ironic they walk in and have to be wheeled out?”

“Ha, always the jokester, Reggie. These are my brothers, Harold Joe and Jimmy Dale. They’ve come to cart me home.” Reggie extended his hand to shake with Jimmy and Harold.

“Nice to meet you, sirs,” Reggie said. “Ms. Evans was one of my favorite teachers when I was in school. I think she was one of the only teachers who didn’t send me to detention.”

“That was only because I appreciated your warped sense of humor, Mr. Cannon,” Opal laughed. “You could always make me laugh, and I thought that was worth keeping you in the classroom. Tell me about this job while you’re rolling me out of here.”

“Okay, be glad to, but first, you have to show me your release papers,” Reggie said. “I want to make sure you’re not an attempted escapee. However, these two accomplices of yours could probably take me if they have to.”

Opal waved the papers in her hand in front of Reggie, and he noted the doctor’s signature. “Penmanship, not something they teach in medical school,” he said. “Okay, you’re good to go. You need a dolly for your loot?”

“No, my wonderful sister-in-law took all my loot yesterday so I wouldn’t have to worry with it.”

“I wish I’d known you were here, Ms. Evans. I would’ve stopped by to talk to you,” Reggie said as he pushed Opal down the hall. “I’ve had some things happen to me I could’ve bent your ear about. I’m going to school now, studying on how to be a phlebotomist. I’ll be working down in the lab in a few months.”

“I would love to catch up with your life, Reggie,” Opal said. “I always wonder about you and your friend, Carl, I believe his name was.”

“Yeah, Carl died, Ms. Evans,” Reggie replied. “He was shot in the spine. Spent a few years in a wheelchair. He drove that wheelchair like a sports car. Carl sat on that corner over by the projects, down by The Squeeze Inn every day, drinking. They found him, sitting in his chair in the alley, dead. He had a little girl, Carline. She looks just like him. His mama has her now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Reggie. You two were good friends. I remember, I never saw one of you without the other. How is your grandmother?” Opal asked.

“She’s just fine, still mean as ever” Reggie chuckled, “She’s the reason I’m going to school, always pushing me to do something.”

“You listen to her. She loves you more than life itself. Tell her I said hello, and I’m happy to hear she’s still pushing.”

“I sure will do that, Ms. Evans. She’ll be happy I ran into you,” Reggie said. “Well, this is as far as my chariot goes. The wheel’s lock up like a grocery basket if I get out of the area.”

Harold opened the door of the truck, while Jimmy and Reggie helped Opal into the passenger side. “You need an elevator in this thing, Harold” Opal snorted. “Bye, Reggie, I hope I run into you again sometime.” Reggie stood on the sidewalk, staring after Opal as the truck drove away. He would tell his grandmother he saw Ms. Evans. They met several times when he was in school. Ms. Evans was the only parent conference his grandmother bothered to attend. She enjoyed hearing good things about Reggie, not all the complaints.