

Excerpt from “Run Of The Town” by Terrence Rundle West © 2006

THE TELEGRAM

By

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‘The joys of parents are secret, and so are their griefs and fears.’

—Francis Bacon: *Essays* (1625)

Edna ceased her dusting the instant she heard noise on the stairs. Instinctively her eyes sought the clock on the end table, next to the pictures of her uniformed sons. 9:45 a.m. The footsteps were too heavy to be one of the kids, home from school with an illness, and too light to be Tess from down below, lumbering up for an early coffee. She propped the dust mop against the wall and ran her fingers around her chignon; several hairs where out of place.

“Goodness, what a sight I must be,” she muttered under her breath. “Who’d be calling this early anyway?”

She took in the results of her early morning travails - laundry ironed and folded, apple pies sitting in the warming oven of the wrought-iron cookstove, dishes drying between the water pump and sink. *I may be a sight*, she thought, turning towards the window and squinting into the strong March sunlight, *but as God’s my witness it’s not out of laziness*. She had never fully understood why the early rays pounding off the linoleum floor and bouncing around the walls, energized her so. Perhaps it was the ethereal quality that filled the

room, like in the pictures of Jesus the kids brought home from Sunday School but most likely, it was the prospect of spring and the promise of new life it brought. Whatever, she resented the interruption of her most productive moments.

By the time the party on the stairs got to the landing, Edna had thrown her apron on the chair and was reaching for the door. But when the expected knock failed to come she was puzzled. Why could she hear foot shuffling and deep breathing but no rapping? She stood motionless, one hand poised over the doorknob the other pressed against her breast; the familiar flutter in her throat was returning, the arrhythmia coming back. Where was her medicine? She turned her head towards the bedroom then back to the door. "Who is it?" she called, a tremolo in her voice.

A throat was cleared on the other side of the panel; a male throat. "I'm looking for Mr. or Mrs. Smith?" it said. "I have a telegram."

Edna felt the asymmetric explosions in her chest. Her forearm found the wall; her body tilted into it for support. Her eyes welled up.

"Mrs. Smith?" the voice repeated.

Edna tried to answer but when no sound came she pushed herself off the wall and opened the door a few inches. A young man shifted close to the opening. "Are you Mrs. Smith?" he said softly, holding out the telegram. Edna nodded. He shoved it through the opening but she stepped back.

"Who's it from?" she said.

The man's arm dropped. "I'm sorry, madame, I'm ... not sure. It's in a sealed envelope. It just came in at the CNR and the telegrapher told me to deliver it pronto." He raised the telegram again and waited.

Slowly her hand came up and touched the loathsome object. She expected the bite of a hot poker but instead it was inert, cold, like the message she knew it contained. "Thank you," she whispered and began to close the door.

But the young man's business was not complete and he hurriedly pushed a clipboard through the open crack. "You have to sign for it," he said.

She took the board, unscrewed the fountain pen tied to it, and scribbled her name.

"Mrs. Smith," the young man said, as she passed the clipboard back, "I'm terribly sorry."

A thank you formed on her lips, but Edna swallowed it as she sized up the young man. He turned and began descending the stairs. "How old are you?" she asked weakly to his back. His pace quickened, her voice went up. "Why aren't you in uniform?" He began taking the stairs two at a time. "Answer me!" she yelled. "You're of age. Why should my oldest boys be risking their lives for King and Country while you walk the streets safe and sound." The door swung shut at the foot of the stairs. "Zombie!" she screamed. She looked at the envelope, then rushed to the windows and closed the drapes.

Edna had no idea how long she'd been at the table, head buried in her arms, when she heard Tess coming up from below. She tried to rally but gave up. Tess's gait was slow, her progress deliberate, like a hangman mounting the gallows. When she reached the landing she knocked, waited, then pushed the door open, frowning at the darkness. "Edna?" she called. "Edna?" She stepped into the room, caught sight of her neighbour and approached. "What is it?" she asked, placing a hand gently on her friend's shoulder. Edna shook her head, rose and buried her thin body in Tess's soft, portly embrace. "There, there," Tess said, rocking back and forth. "Tell Tess all about it."

"A telegram," she said, conscious of the quiver that ran through Tess's stout frame.

Tess's eyes fell to the table, taking in the envelope. "I wondered when I heard strange footsteps on the stairs," she said, stroking Edna's hair and making soothing sounds. She had a son and two brothers over there and panicked like all mothers at radio interruptions, strange footsteps on the porch and sudden knocks at the door. Life during war

was a sick lottery with fate, the master gamester, ready to draw your name at any moment. And the payoff if your number came up? A lifetime of grief and despair. It was 1944 and black wreathes were popping up all over town; at the Wilsons', Wests', Killicks', Brounds, Floods', and a host of other homes. "Which boy?" Tess asked, hesitantly.

Edna shook her head. "I don't know. I can't look. Opening it would be like choosing. How could a mother do that?"

Tess pushed her away gently and picked up the envelope. "I'll do it," she said.

Edna snatched it back, pressing it to her breast. "No! It's addressed to Clem. Only he can open it."

Tess placed her hands on the back of a chair and nodded. "Then we'll have to send for him?" she said softly. "Where's he working today?"

Edna stared vacantly across the darkened room. Tess waited. "I'm not sure. We argued before he left this morning." She began to sob.

"Where was he yesterday?"

Edna cleared her throat. "Replacing track with the section gang up near Valentine Creek."

Tess nodded. "I'll run across to Martin's Hardware Store," she said, moving to the door. "Charles will know how to get hold of him."

When Tess returned Edna was still at the table turning the envelope over and over in her hands. "They've despatched a speeder to the Valentine but with snow drifting over the tracks we'll be lucky to see Clem before twelve-thirty." Tess rolled up her sleeves. "So, that gives us time to get busy. The young ones will be home for lunch in an hour." She moved to a window and pulled back the drape.

"Leave it closed!" Edna snapped.

Tess moved to the kitchen, ignoring her. “We’ll just open one curtain for now,” she said, dropping another log into the cookstove and sliding the kettle over the firebox, “and we’ll have tea, it’ll do us both wonders. Don’t you think?”

She opened the cupboard door, examining its contents. “Now what would the kids like to eat when they get home from school?” Edna stared at her blankly. “We’ll make it Klik today,” Tess said, answering her own question. “Yes, Klik sandwiches will do just nicely, I’m sure.” She removed a tin and plucked the key from the top of the can. It came off with a pop that echoed through the room. “I just hate these tins, don’t you Edna? Half the time the key’s missing and you feel like throwing the whole darn thing away and even if it’s still glued to the can you’ve got to pry up the metal catch on the tin and place the key over it and twist and twist till you think you’re wrist is going to break and when it’s finally open the tin’s so sharp you wind up cutting a finger and you’ve got to keep it out of reach of prying little hands because ...”

“Tess, Tess, *please*,” Edna said, covering her ears.

Tess twisted the key in silence. The thin, metal band separated from the rest of the can with a snap and the odour of cold, jellied pork filled the room. There was a knock at the door. Tess rushed to open it.

“Oh! Thank God you’re here, Reverend,” she said.

Reverend Carter stood on the threshold looking in. “Came as soon as I heard,” he said, positioning his galoshes on the top step behind him and handing his coat and fedora to Tess. He tip-toed over to Edna. “I’m so sorry,” he said, placing a hand on hers and sitting at the table beside her. “Shall we pray?” She nodded. Tess bowed her head at the kitchen counter. “Most merciful Lord, who’s Son died on Golgotha’s cross, hear our prayers. O Thou who knowest the pain that dwells in the heart of a parent who has lost a child, receive this the soul of ...” He stopped and looked up, a line of perspiration beading on his lip. Edna’s eyes were squeezed shut, her face contorted in pain, her knuckles white in clamped hands. He turned to Tess. “Which son?” he mouthed. Tess shrugged. His eyes closed as he resumed. “Receive the soul of this, the child of Edna and Clem. Clasp him to Thy bosom and succor him gently in Thy heavenly embrace. Amen.”

Opening his eyes Reverend Carter picked up the envelope and leaned forward. “Edna,” he said, “you have to open it.” Edna bit her lip and stared at him. The kettle began to scream.

Tess laid slices of bread on the counter and got out the butter. “She won’t touch it until Clem gets here,” she said.

“But Edna,” Carter continued, “are you sure it’s from the Minister of War? I mean, it could be from any number of ...”

Edna glared at him. “Clem and I have been married for twenty-two years. How many telegrams do you think we’ve received in that time?” Reverend Carter shook his head as Edna’s thumb joined her index finger to form a zero. Tess brought the tea.

“So, one of your boys is on convoy duty and the other in Italy?” Reverend Carter said. For an hour he and Tess had been tag teaming, trying to keep the conversation going.

Edna wiped her eyes and looked at them. She resented their senseless prattle but still, it felt good to talk about the boys—their letters, the warmth of the people over there, their plans for after the war—and it kept her mind off the clock and Clem’s tardy return. Their questions made her focus, even produced the odd smile as she recounted some of the things the boys had done over the years. But when she heard her youngest son Henry pounding up the stairs two at a time, grief reclaimed her, like a black curtain.

He raced into the room and halted. “What’s wrong Mom?” he said, frowning.

Seconds later his older sister Rose appeared behind him. “Has something happened to dad?” she said.

Edna opened her arms to her children. They raced to her in tears. “Your parents have received a telegram,” Reverend Carter said.

“And?” Rose asked.

Tess spoke up. “We fear something has happened to one of your older brothers,” she said.

Rose looked from the envelope to the adults. “You haven’t opened it?”

“We’re waiting for your father,” Edna said.

“But mom ...”

“Dad!” Henry shouted.

Heads turned. Clem stood at the door, snow fused to his boots and parka. Edna raced for him, the children too. He dropped his cap on the floor as he embraced his family. Edna clung to him. The children’s eyes flitted from parent to parent, terror written on their faces. Tess placed the sandwiches into a neat pile then severed them with a knife. Reverend Carter looked off.

Finally, kissing the top of his wife’s head, Clem pushed himself away. “Where is it?” he said, squaring his shoulders. Edna pointed to the buff-coloured envelope with its mauve banner announcing Canadian National Telegraphs. Clem began the long journey to the table, a high-pitched squeak emanating from wet soles with each step that took him across the linoleum. In his wake an archipelago of puddles appeared on the floor. He sat down, fishing inside his parka for the leather case that held his glasses. Extracting it he snapped it open and with two calloused hands carefully placed the wire stems over his ears. Then, pushing the glasses up over the bridge of his nose, he reached for the telegram. “I need an opener,” he said. Tess stepped forward with a paring knife which he used in a quick surgical move. From the envelope came a white sheet. “Open the drapes,” he said. Tess moved to the window and pulled them back. Clem took a deep breath giving his eyes time to focus on the purple block lettering embedded on the strips of beige paper glued to the page. He read silently, not bothering to conceal the movement of his lips as they formed over each word. No one breathed. Across the room the sun glittered off the wet lines running down Edna’s cheeks.

Having read it through once Clem nodded, coughed into his fist and began reading aloud. “ ‘OTTAWA, MARCH 15, 1944,’ ” he looked up, “that would have been last night,” he said. “ ‘CROSSED SWORDS WITH A U-BOAT STOP HMCS NEW GLASGOW BLOODIED AND UNDERGOING REPAIRS HALIFAX

DRYDOCK STOP UNEXPECTED LEAVE STOP PRESENTLY
CHANGING TRAINS IN OTTAWA STOP HOME TOMORROW
NIGHT EXPECTING APPLE PIE STOP YOUR LOVING SON
ALBERT STOP