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Nettie's Web

Judith C. McArdle

“Wo, Miss Nettie,” three tow heads chimed, bobbing their way down the leaf strewn path to St. Alexander's School. The morning greeting was for Nettie Cooper, venerable octogenarian of Cornelius Street, who paused momentarily from sweeping her porch steps. As she placed one hand on her brow to shade her eyes from the glare of the sun, her other hand gripped the broom like a staff.

“Good morning, young ladies. Off to school, are you?” said Nettie in that raspy voice the old have that makes you want to clear your throat for them.

Nettie stamped the broom vigorously ridding it of the russet colored needles shed from the towering pine in her front yard.

“Yes, ma'am,” the three chorused, singing a conclusive “Bye!” as they skipped away.

It had been a dry fall. Maple leaves crunched like potato chips under the children's scurrying feet. Nettie watched as the girls went further down the block. She thought of her granddaughter Susan, remembering her at that age. The trio clustered briefly to share some conspiracy, then broke into a sudden run as the school bell sounded. A smile of tenderness moved within Nettie's face. With one more swipe of the broom, she re-entered her house.

Behind an exquisitely etched glass door to Nettie Cooper's house lay the dim hallway. Nettie walked its length passing the parlor, dining room, bedroom and bathroom in sequence until she arrived at the kitchen where she returned the broom to its place in the closet. She checked the clock, and marked her place mentally in the daily schedule. It was eight, and she had just about completed her morning routine. She stopped briefly to let a wave of tiredness pass through her, then she quickened as the

seductiveness of the day's project played in her mind.

“Today I want to finish Susan's sweater.”

Nettie had awakened at 6:00. When the alarm clock rang, she reached over and pressed the stem, falling back with a sigh for the mercy of the responsive silence. Then winding the back key and returning the clock to the night table, Nettie slowly folded back the thick down quilt and reluctantly left her warm bed.

Putting on her house robe and slippers, Nettie rocked a little stiffly out to the kitchen and drew water for the kettle. Padding closely behind her was “Mittens,” Nettie's tabby cat and faithful companion. As Nettie waited for the first low notes of the kettle whistle from the stove, she removed two cinnamon graham crackers from the counter tin and munched them absently. She thought of Susan.

“At the university now, can you imagine!” Nettie said to an audience of only herself, and Mittens. “And going for a Ph.D.”

It pleased Nettie to say “Susan” and “Ph.D.” She wasn't too old to be amazed and filled with admiration. Susan was a wonder.

When the kettle spit a shrill tune, Nettie dropped a tea bag into a deep white china cup and poured in the steaming water. She watched the brown tinge permeate the liquid, transforming it into the inaugural drink of the day. One teaspoon of sugar later, the tea in turn was transforming Nettie in the familiar way this ritual did by bringing her to awareness each morning.

Nettie then took another white china cup, distinguished from her own only by a chip and long brown crack, and scooping out a measure of cat food, she poured out “a little breakfast” for

Mittens. She watched a while as the cat crunched the meal intensively, and when she stretched and shuttered in apparent satisfaction, Nettie accepted that as her sign of permission to go and take her bath.

The bathroom was dominated by a deep draughted, claw footed tub Nettie called "her majesty". As daily bathing was as much a pleasure as her Calvinist unbringing allowed, Nettie filled the tub armpit high and took full measure. Scrubbing was tempered by the use of "sweet" soap, and toweling was finalized by a puffing of aromatic dusting powder which treated her body to the sparse acknowledgement of her sensuality.

In her bedroom, Nettie opened the chifforobe. From the chest-of-drawers side she took out ribbed cotton underwear and stockings, and from the wardrobe side a starched flowered house dress with white buttons. She waited a moment for the small knot of pain which occurred in her chest to pass. Then Nettie sat on the edge of her bed and tied up her brown oxford day shoes, "ugly but comfortable," that she brought every two years from Richard's Dry Goods Store on Eliza Street.

From her dresser Nettie picked up a tortoise shell brush with the horse hair bristles and ran it through her thin gray hair. She braided it, hearing her joints familiar snap as she rolled and fastened the plait she had woven to the back of her head. She smoothed a few wispy strains of hair into place and secured them with side combs. Then Nettie returned to the kitchen and lifting her blue cobbler apron from the hook on the back door, she slipped her arms through the opening, buttoned the top, and tied the sash. She poured a second cup of tea.

Sunlight streamed in the tiny room where most of the hours of Nettie's grown life had been spent, unkindly revealing its state of use and badly needed refurbishment. Nettie was fearful enough of ladders since her fall from one last year, so she resigned herself to the smudgy yellow view she took in when looking out to the side yard garden.

"You really should give up the place, Ma," Mary Claire had said in her regular Monday night call from Seattle. Mary Claire was Nettie's only daughter and Susan's mother.

"Mary Claire, this has been my home for 63 years. I'll be carried out of here in a box. Besides, where would you like me to go, some old folks place like Mary Manor?" Nettie felt a twinge of disgust as she said "Mary Manor."

"Ma," scolded Mary Claire, "your pride's getting the best of you. Mary Manor is a very nice place."

"I stand corrected," Nettie retorted mockingly. Nettie knew all about Mary Manor. Pride or not, she would die rather than go there.

"Besides I'm doing just fine." With those words, Nettie, sitting unseen a thousand miles away, straightened up to sound stronger.

"You could come out here to live with us, Ma. I've been after you for years. Bob and I would love it." Mary Claire countered, weakly and uselessly.

"Hoo-ha" yoddled Nettie, hardly able to suppress the laugh that jumped to her voice. "And what would Bob say if he knew his mother-in-law gets up at night for a swallow of Early Times. Bet he'd have me in one of those meetings next day. 'Hi, I'm Nettie. And I am alcoholic.'"

"Unfair, Ma," Mary Claire chided, although her mother wasn't too far off in her assessment of Bob, even if she knew the swallow of Early Times was a total fabrication.

"Mary, dear," Nettie assured. "The postman Robert checks on me every day. It beats me how you both assume that if I'm eighty, I'm addled."

"You know when Robert first came on the route, they must have told him I was up in age and to look out for me. He came up to me first day, and said, 'Miss Nettie Cooper?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Do you know what year this is, and who is the President.' Well, I just fixed on him and said,

'It's nine and a half hours into the 24th day of June, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-two. You are twenty minutes late on your route. I suppose you must have been discussing William Jefferson Clinton's new health program with Mr. Dawkins up the street. Interesting man, Mr. Clinton, although I like his wife, Hillary Rodham, better.'

"I just loaned Robert my copy of Tale of Two Cities," Nettie said, gaining more confidence.

"I told him I've read all of Dickens twice, so if he ever wanted to talk about it, I'd be pleased to have a conversation."

"You know I think if Dickens were alive today, he'd probably be writing soap operas." Nettie paused in the amusement of that possibility. "His characters are always in a mess."

"So I'd rather talk to Robert about Dickens, Mary Claire," said Nettie, coming full circle to make her point, "than jabble with those old folks at Mary Manor about 'Wheel of Fortune.'" Mary Claire in Seattle shook her head and signed off for another week.

Nettie entered the parlor. She took her "place" in the wing back chair at the edge of the bay window where the light was good. Mittens ambled in behind her, then wound around some personal path she had mapped to her place in the "company room". The hall clock ticked softly, paced like a metronome by the golden pendulum.

Nettie turned the knob of the ancient radio whose face bore a design of church windows with fabric panes. It spoke in crackles. Nettie twisted the dial, passing Rush Limbaugh, "the man sounds like he's sitting on tacks," finally reckoning for National Public Radio. "NPR" was Nettie's favorite, next to all day classical music. Then she picked up her large tapestry knitting pouch and settled comfortably in the regal chair, intending this day to finish Susan's sweater. "The subject today is 'Gays in the Military'," the host declared from NPR. "Oh, dear," Nettie said, involuntarily. She looked half a room away at Edward. "Well, Edward," Nettie said out loud, just like she used to do as a little girl playing

dolls and creating imaginary conversation, "what do you think?"

In Edward's silence, Nettie picked up the needles holding loops of yarn, which over the next hours, she engaged into life by winding, weaving and shifting until stitches became rows and rows grew in length and shape to become the work of the humble architect's mind.

Edward looked back at his mother with a smile frozen 30 years ago by the base photographer. His maroon lips framed perfect teeth in a face fresh and full of haughty confidence. The khaki hat peaked on Eddie's head at a slight angle. The stiff uniform collar bore the double bars of the rank of Second Lieutenant. On one side of the frame lay a yawning gray velvet box holding a Purple Heart. On the other was a triangled box whose clear window showed several white stars on a deep blue field.

"What do you think," Nettie said, shaking her head a little.

After a while the warm morning sun and the quiet conspired to slow Nettie down. She spread the nearly finished peach wool cardigan on her lap, pulling it to stretch the length and width. She lay her hands on it like a blessing, then rested her head back on the chair, and briefly closed her eyes. At the sign of a shift in motion, Mittens ambled over from the sofa where she had been napping and resettled near Nettie's feet. Nettie drifted into a shallow reverie.

Nettie thought a little about her life. She thought about Edward, Mary Claire, and Tom. Her husband Tom was gone eight years now. They'd be celebrating their 60th anniversary this August if he'd lived. Their marriage was a real reflection of themselves and their times, she thought. Hard work, saving, simple, straight. Tom was a good, though unexpressive man.

There was never a question of romance between them, but a faithful rendering of roles internally evolved and for the most part unexamined and unspoken. If one could speak of the presence of love, it would have been from the beginning breaths of the children. Life had certainly

brought sorrows. But what sorrows had come were outlived and overcome by just going on. There were little happinesses, and perhaps enough to relieve the daily way of things. And maybe just as life only seemed to be the way it was, there came to be a Susan.

It was beyond Nettie to understand; she could only feel what was to her a rare and special bond. Nettie's spirit, one never allowed or encouraged, and never truly reborn in Mary Claire, was full of dawn and day in Susan. Visits and vacations brought a joy that made a mindful Nettie giddy.

They talked about everything, she and Susan, especially Susan's mother. They shared awful secrets, laughed like magpies, and gossiped like neighbors over the backfence. They read to each other, wrote long letters, and mailed envelopes stuffed with clippings underlined and noted in the margins.

Nettie taught Susan how to knit, crochet and embroider. All the skills her mother had shown to her, Nettie had tried to teach Mary Claire, but "oh, dear, oh, dear, ten thumbs and no fingers." Mary Claire had been impossible. So in late lazy mornings and late sleepy afternoons, they sat together, grandmother and child, tying themselves in the golden web of love with working hands, wonderous cloths and threads of every make and composition.

Nettie's year was always marked by a special day with Susan-Christmas lunch at Marshall Field's. It was the only observance of a religious feast Nettie allowed, having long ago dropped off going to church. Church somehow managed to give Nettie more of what she already had, only heavier. But Susan and Nettie in the Walnut Room, eating their way through to a dessert of an ice cream sleigh with candy cane runners was the only heaven she needed on earth or expected to have. Nettie hoped Susan could come again this year. She longed for it.

"Pearl buttons," Nettie said, startling herself awake. "Where did I put those pearl buttons?" Nettie demanded impatiently of herself. She

pushed out of the depths of the large chair and went to the dining room side board. In the bottom drawer, where Nettie kept her best things, she pulled aside the huge white brocade tablecloth, pressed and glistening, with the matching napkins she used for special occasions; the embroidered scarfs and pillow cases with hand laced edges she saved for Susan's Hope Chest; the tatted collars and cuffs lying in wait for her dark winter dresses; the starched doilies crocheted from patterns her mother had scrawled on butcher paper, and the knitted baby booties and christening caps she had put aside as gifts for the next generation. Each was separated by crisp tissue protecting the fine labors of a weaver's hands that passed through and passed on tradition.

"And there you are," said Nettie with satisfaction, pressing back all the layers she had moved to find the card with eight delicate orbs. returning to her seat, still holding the warmth and depression of her just leaving, Nettie felt a sharp pain. She took a breath, and another. She laid her head back a little. She saw Robert coming up the block.

"I'll rest a bit," she thought, and closed her eyes. She did feel very tired. She drifted again. Robert climbed the porch. He dug in his huge leather bag, fishing out a book and a hand written letter. He pressed the bell and waited for an answer. He peered in the side of the bay window. He could see Nettie in her chair. In her hands were silver needles.

She did feel very tired. She drifted again "Susan's sweater," Robert said to himself. He saw old Mittens was rolling a small ball of yarn and jumping around the room. Miss Nettie looked to be asleep.

Robert rang the bell again. And then he knocked. When Nettie didn't move and didn't answer, Robert put his forehead against the door. Large tears slowly filled his eyes, rolled down his face and splashed on the gray porch floor. "Aw, Miss Nettie, Miss Nettie," Robert said. "Today I could have talked to you about Dickens."