

BLARNEY

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A small gray replica of Blarney Castle that played "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" gathered dust on an end table in a corner of the little room. Or, rather, it tried to gather dust. Every time it had hoarded any perceptible amount, the old little woman would bustle over and wipe it spotless with a cloth sprayed with Lysol.

She hefted the old black phone and dialed "2" seven times, to hear the deep friendly voice of the man who gave the weather report.

"Continued cloudy and cold today with a high of 22 and an overnight low of seven. The extended outlook—"

"You were wrong yesterday," she scolded.

"—becoming warmer Thursday—"

"It didn't snow at all. And I was hoping I could watch the snow out of my picture window."

"—and Friday with a chance—"

"No, it didn't snow at all. Now how can I trust you, young fellow? After you tell me something that isn't true at all?"

"—of rain mixed with snow. Be sure to look into a First National Blue Check Account, no service charge with an average balance over one hundred dollars. . ."

"I want you to know I'm very disappointed in you."

". . . Continued cloudy and cold today with a high of 22—"

"No need to repeat yourself. I heard you just fine the first time. But you shouldn't tell people *anything* if you're not sure. People count on the weather, and you shouldn't tell them anything if you're not sure. But don't worry, I'll still call you again tomorrow. Goodbye, dear."

She replaced the receiver before the tape could modulate any further, then climbed out of her bulbous green sofa and tottered over to the front window of her tiny little orange brick house. She stood there for a long time, just watching the cars whiz past in the twilight, her body a wrinkled silhouette outlined by the passing glow of their headlights.

Her name was Bess Titsworth, and she was the last Titsworth left in Denver, since a cousin had changed his name a few years before. She would never forgive Humphrey for that. Her only daughter, Clementine, had married a high school teacher (she could have done much better)

and got *her* name changed to Woodworth. The son-in-law would always say that he had changed Clemmie's Tits to Wood. "That tells you what kind of a fellow he is," thought Bess, pursing her lips in disapproval. They lived in Dallas and never called or came to visit, except on Christmas, when they didn't really want to but she let them because it made them feel better.

Bess had been very independent, really, before she stopped driving and started staying all the time in her little house.

A few years before she would drive all around the east side of town, puttering around the shopping malls, always parking her immaculate 1967 Cadillac Coupe De Ville in the most remote reaches of the parking lots, so those rough drivers wouldn't hit her car with their doors. She would hold up lines in supermarkets for record times asking why the melba toast cost almost twice what it had forty years ago, telling the fascinated cashier about how she had gotten her daughter (who was now married to a very important educator) to eat her melba toast when she was a baby by telling her it was holy communion practice. She would face service stations with ruin by threatening not ever to come back for her dollar's worth of premium if they didn't to a better job cleaning her windshield, and would prove in numerous debates with department store clerks and grocery sack boys that the Democrats had to be fixing the elections, because *all* of her friends voted straight-ticket Republican, but the Democrats still won.

But now she only ventured out once every two weeks to the grocery, stacking up traffic behind her as she inched the four blocks to and from the store, always leaving behind a staff of confused and chastised checkout girls and assistant store managers.

The veins stood out on her tiny hands. The wrinkles on her face changed directions when she smiled. Her hair was an uncanny sable brown that battled to explode into gray between Miss Clairols. She was very old, but she didn't mind. She didn't mind even living alone; her little husband had always left things lying around, and had always left the toilet seat up. It had been fifteen years since he had passed away, and the toilet seat had been up the whole time.

She sighed, then brightened, noticing a crinkle in the plastic over over the easy chair in her dim living room. Bustling over and fixing it took three or four minutes. She fiddled with the TV set, but there was nothing but news on. Why couldn't they have a special Lawrence Welk station for the older people?

There was dust in the house with her, fugitive dust that floated in the light from the windows before settling briefly on something and being quickly Lysoled away. The dust was all that moved in the house except for Bess, and it quieted what little sound there was.

‘Hmmm. Should I have a cup of pudding now, or wait until after I straighten things up a little?’ she thought. She thought about that for a while in the silence.

‘Hmmm.’ She took a brief tour of the quiet dim rooms, moving little figurines and souvenir matchbooks fractions of inches, smoothing out microscopic creases in the bedspread, making sure there was plenty of Kleenex in the dispenser. Then she went into the kitchen to tackle a can of pudding.

It was Snack-Pack pudding, all-artificial chocolate fudge. She had to get a screwdriver out of the little tool drawer and pry the flip-top lid from the can, and then she could only eat half the can, because it was so rich.

She bustled slowly (a slow bustle is like a very fast totter) over to the rocking chair next to the sofa and eased herself down into it. Then she rocked. The only sound in the house was the low hum of the air vent from the furnace.

Rocked. Very slowly, for a long time.

She looked at the phone.

‘I wish someone would call and talk to me.’

Rocked.

‘It would be so nice to have someone to talk to.’

The refrigerator stared back at her, and the grandfather clock stood silent, having been broken for a long time. She stared at the shine in the front of the refrigerator.

‘Wouldn’t it?’

The freezer door came open a little as it said, ‘I’ll say.’

She blinked. ‘What?’

A little cold vapor smoked out as it said, ‘I said, ‘I’ll say.’ ’

‘You’ll say what?’ Bess was a little frightened, but she did prefer that things be clear in what they were talking about.

‘I’ll say it would be nice to have somebody to talk to.’

‘You will?’

‘I just did.’

She stood up and bustled around in a circle for a while, before

turning back to the Frigidaire. She was tussling with mixed emotions—there was nothing she liked better than having somebody to chit-chat with, but she didn't know whether or not she wanted it to be furniture.

"Can you talk?" she said, turning back to it.

It paused, churning its freon. "Yes, I can. Always could."

"Why didn't you say something before?"

"You never asked me anything."

"Oh. Well, at least you're polite."

"Thank you. I'm not the only one, either."

"Other refrigerators talk?"

"I mean other things here in the house. They can talk, too."

"That's right," the clock chimed in. "And I do wish you'd get me fixed, ma'am."

"Oh! Hello!"

"Hello. It isn't any fun being broken."

She looked sympathetically into its face, but she was firm. "Well, I'm sorry, but the man wants a hundred and fifty dollars to fix you."

"My," it knitted its numerals. "That is a lot of money. Still, I think I'm worth it."

Bess was warming to her audience now. They all seemed *very* nice. "Well, we'll talk about that later. Now who else can talk in here?"

The whole house fluttered, drawers opening and closing, cabinets flipping their doors, and the toilet seat came down for the first time in a long time.

"I can," cried the lamp brightly.

"Me, too!" That was a bookshelf.

"Do not forget about me," said the coffee table in a polished voice.

"And don't forget your Blarney Castle, lass."

They had a marvelous get-together, Bess bustling from room to room, chatting with and about every little thing, and she just knew she had the friendliest furniture anywhere. She decided after awhile that this was sufficient reason to call her daughter in Dallas, since this was the biggest news that she'd had since her last check-up. Could her daughter handle this, though? Bess couldn't be sure, but she picked up the phone anyway.

"I talk, too," it said in a little voice that rang in her ears.

"Fine, dear, but not now. I'm going to call Susan."

She pushed a pencil into the last fingerhole of the small black phone, hefting the dial around to the little metal bar that stopped it.

"Operator."

"Hello, dear. This is Mrs. Titsworth. Do you remember me? We talked last week when I tried to call the President."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but that must have been one of the other operators. There are thirty of us here."

"Oh. Well, I want to call my daughter in Dallas."

"What is her name, ma'am?"

"Susan."

"Susan what?"

"Oh, yes. It's Susan Woodworth. The number is 619-382-3710."

"Um, if you know the number, ma'am, why didn't you dial it yourself?"

"Well, you see, I was hoping to talk to that very *nice* young girl who helped me last week, but that isn't who you are."

"I'll connect you."

The phone rang down in a nouveau-ranch house down in the buckle of the Sun Belt.

"Hello?"

"Susan, dearest, this is Mother."

"Oh, hello Mother. I've been meaning to call, but it's just so busy around here."

"Yes, I know how busy you are. You don't have to worry about calling me. Don't worry about you mother here alone, trapped in this house."

"Oh, Mother—"

"Well, don't worry about that. I have some real news for you tonight."

"What is it, Mother?"

"Are you ready?"

"—Yes."

"Well, all right. I've been talking to my furniture."

"Oh, that's fine . . . *What?*"

"The furniture has been talking to me, and since I haven't been out for so long and I certainly don't have anyone else to talk to . . ."

"To the furniture?"

"To the refrigerator, who is very nice, and to my grandfather clock, and to the tables and chairs and cabinets, and, oh, my Blarney Castle has the sweetest Irish accent."

"Mother, do you feel all right?"

"I feel marvelous, now that I have a whole houseful of friends."

"Hold on a minute. I'm putting Bill on the line."

Bess let the corners of her mouth wrinkle down, because she had never liked her son-in-law.

"Hello, Mother Titsworth. What is this foolishness?"

"Nothing, William. I would like very much to talk to my daughter."

"What have you been telling her?" His voice was low as always, a quick, ambitious voice.

"I only wanted to tell Susan that I have been having the nicest conversation with the furniture."

"Oh, now—"

"Now, don't be put out, William. After all, it seems no one else is ever going to call me."

"What's the matter with you? You can't talk to furniture."

"Don't try to stop me, just because you feel guilty."

"Will you be serious, damn it all!"

Bess' voice was very soft, offended at his language.

"I am serious, William. My furniture had been very nice to me, and we have been chatting all afternoon."

"All right. Just don't go away. We'll be there tonight or tomorrow."

"Where would I be doing?"

"It seems you can't take care of yourself, Mother Titsworth."

"Well, at least I have my furniture to help out."

He hung up, and the receiver said, "That guy sounds like a real bastard."

"Don't you say things like that," Bess reprimanded. "Not in my house." She dialed the "O" again.

"Operator."

"Hello, dear. Are you the girl I talked to a little while ago, about calling my daughter in Dallas?"

"Um . . . as a matter of fact, I am."

"Oh, fine. Well, did you know that she and her husband are coming up to see me this very night? It seems they don't approve of my talking all the time with my furniture, which makes such nice conversation. *You* don't mind, so you?"

"Mind what?"

"That I talk to my furniture."

"Oh, no. Not at all. What is this, lady?"

"Why, nothing to worry about. Listen, dear, would you like to talk to my refrigerator?"

“What is your name, ma’am?”

“I told you the last time. It’s Bess Titsworth.”

“Where do you live?”

“In my house at 1554 N. Post Road. It’s orange brick, with nice bushes and ivy in front, but the ivy is getting over the picture window, and I suppose I’ll have to pay some man to come and cut it back.”

“Don’t go anywhere tonight, ma’am. I’ll make a few calls and get back to you.”

“Oh, you’re going to call *me*? That’s just fine. I’ll stay right here, and talk to you later, dear. Thank you.”

She hung up the phone and leaned comfortably back into her rocking chair, taking in the room and all her friends, a little tired from all the excitement. The room was silent.

“Well,” she said brightly, “why don’t we get back to our nice little talk?”

She was still talking away when they came to get her, two handsome young men from the Emergency Center and her daughter and son-in-law, who had caught the first plane up. She introduced them all to her house, and protested when they piled her into the back seat of their Ford station wagon.

They took her to live with an old aunt from the other side of the family, a woman who lived alone in an apartment in Topeka, and they were all very happy. All Bess had ever really wanted was someone to putter and bustle and talk with.

They had put the house up for sale, and there was now a square metal sign rusting away in the rain out in front of the ivy-covered picture window.

The lights were off inside. The dust filtered won in the silence, covering the floor and the top of the refrigerator and the turrets of the Blarney Castle. The heat had been turned off, so there was not even a whisper of air from the vents in the corners of the floors. The rooms were still, the house quiet, dead.

The refrigerator said, “What are we gonna do now?”



A time for war; a time for peace. . . .