

What To Do About Ralph

It wasn't that she didn't like Ralph; it was just that she didn't know how he fit in her life anymore. Sitting in her living room she imagined him with her there, in various different locations, but she just couldn't get comfortable with the idea. No, Ralph would have to go. Thelma wasn't a woman who tortured herself, or anyone else, with indecision. Once she made up her mind there was no turning back, so it was decided. Now it was merely a question of what to do with him. She couldn't just throw him out with the garbage, that would be too cold, and although she had never been accused of being overly affectionate, she wasn't cruel either. No, she would have to see to it that Ralph was properly taken care of, that the matter of his removal was handled with some delicacy. He had, after all, been her companion for several years.

In fact, he had been her only real friend. She was an only child so she didn't have any sisters to talk about the big things that sometimes needed talking about, and her parents had died years ago. She never did talk to her mother about the big things anyway, so even if she were still alive they would only talk about how her job was going, what the church choir was singing, how the weather was. Really, Thelma couldn't think of any big things to talk about. She didn't have children. There weren't any men in her life, other than Ralph; there really hadn't ever been. Oh, there was that boy Martin Minton she dated when she first moved to Midland to attend the business college. Once a week he would take her to the movie theater downtown and he would hold her hand in his cold delicate hand. Once, dropping her off

at her dorm, he had kissed her on the cheek, and then she hadn't heard from him again other than when she saw him Sundays in church, and then he always did his best to sit on the opposite side of the aisle from her, or in the back so that he could slip out without having to say hello.

Ralph had never been what you would call a boyfriend, but it was nice having someone to listen to her, even if what was being said wasn't important. And she had to admit, Ralph had been good at listening. He helped pass the time. Sometimes driving her route he would sit listening to her so intently, never interrupting, that before she knew it they were crossing the Perrine Bridge into Twin Falls. She would have to check him every once in a while to make sure his eyes were still open; she didn't take him along on these trips to sleep. Sometimes she'd ask him a question to make sure he'd been listening and he always surprised her by knowing the answer. So she put up with him, taking him along once a month on her business route, even sharing the same room, although not the same bed. She wasn't interested in Ralph that way and he didn't seem to mind.

Their last trip through Idaho had been different right from the start. When she pulled up in front of Ralph's two bedroom bungalow and tooted her horn at six-thirty sharp, just as she always did, he wasn't ready. He knew how important it was for her to be at the property in Twin Falls at nine o'clock. She was on a very strict schedule, and she had explained to him before he ever started travelling with her that he wasn't to interfere whatsoever with her performance of her job and that most definitely included her being on time. She laid on the horn and still he didn't come out.

“My word!” she said as she got out of the car and rapped on Ralph’s door. Then she went around the porch and, cupping her forehead against the glass with her hand, peered into the front room. There was no sign of Ralph. Just when she was headed back to the car the front door opened and, turning, she could see Ralph standing in the doorway, his tee shirt half-covering his belly. His cane was in one hand, the other held a cigarette.

“I’ll be just a minute, Thelma. I’m having a rough go of it this morning. Hope you don’t mind,” he wheezed.

“Mind? I’m already late because of you. I told you never to let this happen.”

“Said I was having a rough morning, Thelma. My bag’s packed. Could you get it for me?”

“You haven’t even got a shirt on. I’m leaving without you, Ralph.” Thelma turned for the car.

“God Damn it Thelma, I got a right to get sick don’t I? I’ll be O.K. if you help me just this once.” Thelma had never heard Ralph cuss before.

“What’re you sick with, Ralph? If you got the flu I don’t want you riding with me. I can’t afford to get sick, not this week, with all I’ve got to do.”

“More like insomnia, Thelma. Can’t seem to settle down. Nerves all a jumble and my breathin’ hasn’t been good. Tell you the truth, I could use the company; be good for me to get out if you’d help me just this once.”

“Well, just this once I guess. I haven’t been late for an appointment in twenty-three years though, so you’re asking more than you might

know, Ralph.” In a few minutes they had Ralph’s bag and oxygen in the car and they were pulling onto the interstate.

About the time they passed the Micron plant the traffic thinned out and Ralph started in. He talked non-stop all the way to Twin, telling Thelma things she had never heard before, which was irritating to her because he was supposed to do the listening. He told her how his dad had disappeared one year, just up and left after potato harvest. That was the year the cows got brucellosis. The state agents had quarantined the herd.

“Wasn’t really a herd, just the six of them; had names for each one. More pets than animals. Then one day they showed up with a dozer. Dug a trench up on a knoll, so’s not to contaminate the ground water, they said. They drove those cows down into the trench and the State Police guy stood on the bank and shot them all. Easiest hunting ever, he said, trying to make light of it, but the others didn’t see any humor in killing another man’s animals, even though it had to be done. I’ll never forget my dad standin’ there watching his girls being put down. There wasn’t any tears, but when the state official would say something to him he just kept starin’ down at that pit like he was somewhere else, like he never heard a word. Soon as the shootin’ was done the dozer fired up again and in less than an hour the ground was all smoothed over like nothin’. The state guys left in their cars, six of them, like a god damn parade, blinkers flashin’, the whole bit. Maybe more like a funeral procession. None of us ever went up there again, on that knoll, knowin’ what had happened there, what lay underneath.

“After the troopers left my dad went to the barn. He spent the next few days cleaning it up like it’d never been before; even slept in the barn, sneaking in to the house at night for food. We all stayed away, afraid he’d take the pain out on us. What he’d been doing was fixing up the place like a memorial. He’d made signs for every stall in bright colorful letters with each cow’s name: Bessie; Clara; Daisy. There was fresh clean hay in every manger, oats in the buckets, clean straw on the floor, and a brand new braided halter hanging by each stall, too.

“That’s when my mom started to worry about him, thought he might be lost in his head is what she said, the grief too much. We all went to church that summer, and for as long as I lived on the farm after that, prayin’ that things would turn for the better. I guess we didn’t pray good enough, or maybe God was getting’ even with us for all the time we’d neglected Him, because things turned the other way. We worked as hard as any family around. But sometimes hard work and prayer just aren’t enough. If the Lord wants to teach you something He’s bound to give you a lesson, whether you want it or not.

“Trouble comes in threes Mom always said. We lost the cows in March and the potatoes in August. That’s when the wilt took hold. Funniest damn thing, we were the only family to get it; our fields all sickly and right across the road thick green potato plants. Tried harvesting them but wasn’t anything but culls, not a single grade A on the whole place.

“If’n it hadn’t been for that comin’ right on the heels of the cow business Dad might have made it, Mom said. But comin’ all together like that it was just too much for him. He took to sleepin’ in the barn

again and then one day he wasn't there no more; just gone. We never did know what happened to him."

"My, aren't we talkative this morning?" Thelma said. "Who cares about a bunch of cows and potatoes, anyway?"

"It's not just cows and potatoes, Thelma. I'm tellin' you about my life."

"But that was a long time ago, Ralph. It isn't your life anymore."

"You never leave that stuff behind, Thelma. It's wove so deep inside of me that I'll never get rid of it."

"But what's the point? You can't change a thing."

"No, but maybe I can understand it."

"Understand what, Ralph?"

"Who I am. I'm talkin' about who I am, Thelma."

"No you're not, Ralph. That was a long time ago; you're not that anymore, you're the guy sitting next to me, the guy who smokes too much and has to carry an oxygen tank around with him."

"I've got to get a new tank in Twin, Thelma. This one's almost out."

"What's gotten into you, Ralph? You know I have a three o'clock in Pocatello. I haven't got time to get oxygen. You'll just have to go without for a while. We can find some in Idaho Falls tonight."

"What if I have an attack?"

"You've been talking non-stop for two hours. I think you'll be fine, Mister Jabbermouth."

"I could take the car and get some while you're in your meeting," Ralph said.

Thelma pulled up to the Blue Lakes Nursing Home.

"Just wait here," she said.

“What about my oxygen?” Ralph said.

“I wish you’d thought of that yesterday.”

“Well?” Ralph insisted.

“We already discussed it. You got your Louis L’Amour?” she asked.

“They’ve got some here,” Ralph said.

“Some what?”

“Oxygen.”

“That’s for the residents.”

“So? I’m sure they’ve got extra.”

“That’d be stealing.”

“For God’s sake, Thelma. You’re the regional manager.”

“All the more reason not to. What kind of example would I be setting?”

“Compassion?”

“Get your book out,” Thelma said with finality.

She’d been with Inland West Care Centers for twenty-three years, climbing from the accounts payable department to regional manager and she didn’t get to where she was by cutting corners and being late. She’d followed the rules and out worked everyone else. When she was in bookkeeping she would sit at her desk for ten hours straight five days a week, and hadn’t been tardy or absent once, not even once, in all of her years. Ironman they called her, perhaps a little resentfully, but she didn’t mind; there was respect in it, too, and she had earned it, grudging as it was.

The girls in the front office welcomed her. Harriet was in her office, they said. “I’d like to talk to Rosita before I see Harriet,” she informed them. Rosita was in the west wing changing linens.

“Buenos dias, Ms. Kurtz.” Rosita saw her in the hallway.

“Good morning, Rosita. How many empty beds do we have today?”

“Two, Ma’am, plus we lost one last night.”

“And how many move-ins do you have scheduled?”

“No move-ins, Ma’am, but we’re showing the two this afternoon.”

“How long have they been vacant?”

“The one a week tomorrow, and the other three days.”

“Hello, Thelma. Karen told me you had arrived. Would you like to come to my office?” Harriet greeted Thelma. “And Rosita, please make certain that bed twenty-three is ready for occupancy. A hospital referral is arriving this afternoon.”

Harriet was wearing a gray business suit with low black pumps, a cream colored blouse and pearls. Her graying black hair was in a French roll; pearls and silver dangled from her ears. Harriet, several inches taller than Thelma, was composed and professional. Thelma didn’t put much emphasis on her own wardrobe; she worked behind the scene, not with the public. She always had. Numbers and procedure were what counted to her, not looks or social graces. Still, when she was around Harriet, Thelma always thought about her own looks and how she might improve them.

Harriet had come with a glowing resume, but there were certainly some things she needed to learn about controlling costs, and Thelma intended to teach her. She didn’t care how many years Harriet had in the business, Blue Lakes was part of her territory and she would see that it performed up to her standards. Per bed revenues for the previous quarter were five per cent below average. She wanted to review Harriet’s turnaround procedures. It didn’t require a crystal

ball to know when a resident was about to code, and the admission process should begin in anticipation of such an event; it was not cost effective to wait until after the client's expiration. She intended to straighten Harriet Bledsoe out on that matter. It was all in the company manual, just as she herself had written it eight years ago: *Anticipation is Key to Bed Management*. This protocol had added two per cent to revenues companywide.

"What are we getting," Thelma asked Harriet, "a long-termer I hope?" Thelma wasn't comfortable with the small talk of greetings; she was there for business.

"She was hospitalized for pneumonia, but her advanced dementia has become too much for her husband to handle."

"Private insurance?"

"Medicaid."

"Oh. Our private insurance ratio is already too low."

"We serve the community we're in."

"So that leaves Blue Lakes with two vacancies."

"That's right."

"Rosita says that one bed's been empty for a week."

"We had it filled but the gentleman passed away the morning he was to move in. It'll be filled today."

Thelma grilled Harriet on her turnaround procedures and marketing plan. She got out spreadsheets and graphs that showed Blue Lakes' underperformance.

"Numbers don't lie," she said.

"We have the lowest vacancy rate in the Valley," Harriet said.

"We can do better," Thelma replied.

“I want to see the kitchen staff,” she told Harriet. “Food costs are too high here, three per cent above average.”

Harriet led her into the kitchen. Ralph was sitting in a chair chatting with the cooks as they worked.

“What are you doing in here?” Thelma tried to hide her anger..

“Talking with Consuela and Ynez,” Ralph grinned. “They’re fixing me a burrito.”

“I thought you were going to wait in the car.”

“It’s nicer in here. Consuela and Ynez are nice. Hi, I’m Ralph.” His large belly hindering his ascent, Ralph remained seated as he extended his hand to Harriet.

“I’m sorry about this, Harriet. He’s supposed to read his book in the car, not disrupt your workers.”

“We’re happy to feed you, Ralph. Ynez makes a mean burrito.”

Harriet was amused by Ralph’s unexpected appearance.

“Karen’s getting my tank filled. I told her I hadn’t eaten anything today, so she sent me down here.” Ralph was enjoying his advantage. He could see how much it troubled Thelma.

“Is there anything else we can do for you? We want you to feel right at home here.” Harriet was enjoying the situation as much as Ralph.

“I think we’re done here,” Thelma said turning to Harriet. “Keep in mind, everything is reflected in the numbers. I expect them to improve in the next quarter. And tighten up your turnaround time.” Then she turned to Ralph. “I’ve got a three o’clock in Pocatello. We need to get going.” Just then Ynez brought two burritos and a bottle of hot sauce.

“The senior eat now?” she said.

“It looks delicious, Ynez. Your beauty is second only to your hospitality.” Ynez smiled shyly.

“We can leave as soon as Karen brings my oxygen tank,” Ralph said, looking toward Thelma. “Right now I’m going to enjoy these wonderful burritos. Ynez, could I trouble you for a Coke?”

“We haven’t got time for that, Ralph.” Thelma was growing more irritated.

Ynez brought a glass and a can of Coke. Ralph pulled a small flask from his pocket and poured the liquid into the glass, then filled the glass with Coke.

“What’s that, Ralph? It better not be what I think it is.”

“Did you know that today is my birthday, Thelma?”

“Birthday or not, there’s no alcohol allowed on the grounds. Isn’t that right, Harriet?” Thelma looked sternly at Harriet, expecting her to take some action.

“It’s O.K. Harriet. It’s for medicinal purposes only. I have a prescription,” Ralph said winking.

“I’m afraid Thelma’s right, Ralph. We don’t allow alcohol in our facility.”

Thelma grabbed the glass off the table and dumped it in the sink.

“Let’s go, Ralph,” she said curtly. “Party’s over.”

“My oxygen?” Ralph said.

“We’ll fill your tank in Pocatello. Get in the car.”

Once in the car Thelma couldn’t control herself any longer. “What in the heck was that, Ralph?” She spit out the words.

“What was what, Thelma?”

“That scene back there. What do you think you are doing?”

“You mean getting something to eat? Taking care of my medical needs?”

“I mean undermining my authority! I mean stealing food and oxygen, public consumption of alcohol.”

“Stealing’s a pretty strong word, Thelma. I asked and they gave, like any good Christian would do.”

“You know very well what you were doing, Ralph, and I won’t stand for it.”

“That’s the question, Thelma.”

“What are you talking about? What’s the darn question?”

“What you stand for. What’s important to you? Is it really all just numbers, profit and loss? Do people matter to you? Do I matter to you? What I was talking about earlier, on the way up. Does it mean anything to you? Do you mean anything to yourself; who you really are, not when you’re in your office looking at spread sheets but when you wake up in the middle of the night, maybe a little scared. Does that person mean anything to you?”

“You’re sick in the head Ralph. You need some serious help.”

“Do I, Thelma? Tell me Thelma, is life really just numbers to you?”

“Life is what it is and you better deal with it. If you don’t, you’ll get left behind, crushed. The alternative isn’t pretty, I know that much.”

“Why do you go to church?”

“Cause it’s Sunday, Ralph. That’s what you do on Sunday.”

“Do you ever think about who Christ was, what it means to be a Christian?”

“Don’t tell me about being a Christian, Ralph. You don’t even know what the inside of a church looks like. I haven’t missed a Sunday

service, well, since I don't know when. I think I know what it means to be a Christian. I've been singing in the choir since I was just a girl. I know that Christ died for my sins, which means that I don't need to be perfect: I'm forgiven. He died for me. And I know that if you don't accept Him as your Lord and Savior that you will burn in Hell for all eternity. I'm worried about you, Ralph, especially the way you've been acting lately. You're not your self. You need to be saved Ralph. You're a good man, I mean deep down, not like you showed today, and I don't want to see you burning. Why don't you come to church with me this Sunday. It'd be good for you, Ralph, and if you could you see your way to accept the Lord, well, it'd be a load off my mind. Might keep you from acting up like today, too..... Ralph?"

She looked over at Ralph, who was sound asleep.

"My sweet Lord, Ralph, I just don't know who you are anymore."

Thelma pulled into the High Desert Care Center at five minutes to three. She fixed her lipstick in the rear view mirror and told Ralph not to give her any trouble this time.

"You just stay in the car, stick to your Louis L'Amour. I won't be long; Dori always has things ship shape, so there won't be much discussing to do. Then we can stop off at Appleby's before we drive to Idaho Falls." Ralph didn't move; she could barely see him breathing. It's just as well, Thelma thought. At least when he's sleeping he isn't causing any trouble.

She always enjoyed her visits with Dori. They had known each other for years, attended First Nazarene together in Midland, stitched quilts and knitted sweaters and hats together for the missionaries. Then one evening Dori's husband was late for dinner, she fretted so, said it

wasn't like him not to show up without calling. She saw it on the news, a pileup on the connector, fatalities; names not released pending notification of kin. But she didn't need to be notified because she could see his truck on its side, the box trailer still upright; Hoffman Remodeling it said, plain as day, and she knew there wouldn't be any call ever again, not from him. With three children and no insurance to speak of, just enough to bury him and get them by for a few months at best, she found herself in need of a job.

Thelma had known she'd be good. What choice did she have but to work, what with three kids to feed; she'd do anything that was asked of her, no complaints. Dori started in accounting, working receivables, then payables, staying at her desk just as fiercely as Thelma, and she learned the business. When Thelma made area manager the first thing she did was put Dori in Pocatello, first as assistant manager so she could learn the ropes, and then a year later she made her manager. Thelma felt comfortable talking to Dori. There was nothing fancy or phony about her; it wasn't like talking to Harriet. And if from time to time she didn't hit her numbers, well, that can happen to anyone; she knew she could count on her to bring them back in line.

Thelma visited with Dori for a while and then they toured the facility. There were two empty beds but they were both scheduled for occupancy in the next few days. The rooms were immaculate, as was the kitchen. There had been two complaints about treatment of patients by family members in the past month, but Thelma was satisfied that company policy had been followed and that nothing would come of them.

It was close to five o'clock when she was done. She invited Dori to Appleby's with them and they walked to Thelma's car together.

"Ralph, wake up. I want you to meet Dori. She's going to Appleby's with us. Ralph..." Thelma pushed on his shoulder but got no response. "I can't get him to wake up. You mind riding in the back, Dori?"

"Let me look at him, Thelma."

Dori put her hand on Ralph's forehead, then leaned over so that her ear was next to Ralph's mouth for a few seconds. She lifted his eyelid, and then took his pulse.

"Go call 911, Thelma. This man is in trouble."

"What kind of trouble? Can't we just drive him to the hospital?"

"Now, Thelma! Move it!"

"Well isn't this a day for firsts! First Ralph and now you, talking to me like that." Thelma blurted as she hurried into the building.

Within a minute they could hear the siren, and a couple of minutes later the ambulance was there. Soon Ralph was on a stretcher, his mound of belly covered by a sheet, and loaded into the ambulance and the swirling lights followed the siren toward the hospital.

"I guess it's just you and me for dinner then," Thelma said to Dori.

"Aren't you going to the hospital with him?" Dori asked with exasperation.

"I'm starved," Thelma said. "Haven't had a bite all day."

"I better go home, Thelma. My kids need me."

"Suit yourself," Thelma said. "See you next month."

After dinner Thelma drove to Idaho Falls. She had a nine o'clock there and a two o'clock in Rexburg, and she'd already booked the

room, so staying the night in Pocatello was out of the question. If she went to the hospital there was no telling how long she would be there, sitting and waiting, reading old magazines after they asked her a bunch of questions she didn't know the answer to. Besides, Ralph was a big boy; he could take care of himself. It wasn't like they were married or anything. She could pick him up on Thursday on her way back through, and if he needed to he could stay with Dori for a day or two. She would call Dori and the hospital as soon as she got to her room.

“Oh, uh huh. I see.” Thelma was on the phone with the hospital administrator.

“How long will that take?”

“I haven't got that much time. Can you get him ready by Thursday?”

“Well, I won't be back this way for a month, so a week isn't going to work. But I'll be passing through Pocatello on my way back to Midland, so if there's anything you could do to get him ready by noon Thursday, I'd be able to pick him up then.”

“Uh huh. Well, see what you can do. It can't be all that difficult.”

Thelma hung up and then changed into her nightgown and tuned the television to the *700 Club*. Watching Reverend Robertson comforted her; it made her feel good knowing that there were people like him watching out for the world, and she was soon asleep.

Tuesday Thelma was busy with the properties in Idaho Falls and Rexburg, and Wednesday she drove to Dillon where Inland West had a small facility. She never could understand why they had built a twenty bed unit in such a remote location and she resented the drive,

especially in winter when the desolate route through Dubois and Monida was drifted in snow. But the drive gave her time to think things over, and she went back over Monday's events. She'd been right, she decided, to go on to Idaho Falls: there wasn't anything she could have done for Ralph.

Her mind kept going back to the silliness he had been discussing that day before he got sick. What was it all about, she wondered? It didn't make a bit of sense to her, talking about things that happened so long ago. Still, her mind kept going back to the story he had told and it was disturbing to her, thinking about Ralph as a small boy. She didn't want to see him that way, watching his father on the bank, the cows falling to their knees and then collapsing. Ralph was just Ralph and she wanted him to stay that way. What could she have done about any of it? Now everything had changed and she didn't know how she felt about Ralph any more.

The world always seemed different crossing into Montana; it was almost like entering a foreign country. There was something softer and richer about the landscape. Idaho was stark, almost harsh with its unremitting skyline bumping up against the wall of mountains. Here there were valleys instead of canyons, their lush hayfields irrigated by ditches that followed the contour of the land, proud haystacks set like manors watching over each meadow. The highway followed a river that fed the ditches, cottonwoods and willows gracing its banks, the meadows meandering with the river's flow. In Idaho everything was square and flat and controlled. Water from unknown sources flowed through concrete ditches as straight as the spoken word on Sunday, feeding perfectly ordered rows of sugar beets and corn and peas in

fields recaptured from the desert. Thelma always felt an easing within herself, driving along the river toward Dillon. It was as if a tightly laced corset had been loosened.

She treated herself to dinner at the Blacktail Station that evening: the company could afford it. She knew for a fact that the other regional managers ran up big expense accounts, but she could never bring herself to do that. Appleby's and Perkins were good enough for her and besides, what she spent came off her profit and loss; eating fancy meals just hurt her performance. But tonight was different. She even ordered a glass of red wine with her dinner, something she had never done before, paying for it in cash so it wouldn't be on her expense report.

Thursday morning she slept till eight and had breakfast downtown. Her leisurely morning seemed like a mini-vacation to her and she wasn't looking forward to the long drive back to Midland, but by ten o'clock she was on the road and she felt a tension in her shoulders as she drove out of town. The first two hours passed without remembrance, as if she was in a trance. As she passed Idaho Falls she called ahead to the hospital to see if Ralph was ready to be picked up. Everything had been arranged.

She turned off the freeway at Pocatello and within minutes a serious young man with a wispy moustache and fat rosy cheeks was helping her get Ralph into the front seat. He looked at her through heavy horn rims, his Adam's apple bobbing above a collar loose on his skinny neck, doing his best to utter solemn words. Thelma stared at him blankly, unable to conjure up the emotion the young man expected, was trying to replicate himself.

“I’ve got a long drive,” she said.

On the way back to Midland Thelma told Ralph all about her week. She told him how the nursing home in Rexburg had ranked second in the company in the last quarter for total revenues per bed, and would have been first if Skeeter McWilliams hadn’t passed away the next to last day of the month. Idaho Falls was tracking in the top twenty per cent of the company, too. If she could only get that Harriet to be more aggressive she might make regional manager of the year; it was still a possibility.

And she told him about her time in Dillon; how she had ordered filet mignon and asparagus in Tarragon cream sauce for dinner, crème brulee for dessert. She almost told him about the glass of wine, but then thought it best to keep that a secret. She felt a little more free when she crossed the state line, she told him, a little more at ease. It was like old times, she thought, driving along and talking the whole way, Ralph silent in the seat beside her.

In no time at all they were back in Midland, pulling into her driveway. She carried her suitcase into her room, then went back for Ralph. She sat in her living room holding him in her lap, wondering at how such a large man could fit in such a small box. First she placed him on the mantle, but that didn’t seem right; if he had been her husband maybe, but not Ralph. Then she put him in her display case next to her dolls, but that didn’t seem quite dignified. The coffee table was too casual, and she liked to arrange her magazines on the surface; Ralph upset the symmetry when she put him there. She would have to keep Ralph in the back room closet, she decided, until she knew just what to do with him.