

Come Over

*The New Yorker*

Edna had slept in curlers for her granddaughter Kitty's first birthday. Linda, Edna's daughter in law—her *ex* daughter in law, actually—was holding a party that afternoon at four-thirty. The curlers had fallen out in the night, but Edna still felt prickly, with bits of pain in her scalp. Thomas called down from his office, "Is that you?"

"I'll be up with the charts in a minute," she answered. The house was a faded gray colonial facing the park. Thomas lived in the back. If he called her again or came out to the landing, she would duck behind the stairs. She hated getting ready for the day. Thomas Mason's medical practice, which she had run for twenty-eight years, was like a boat that set off every morning in terrible condition. At the end of each crossing, it had strewn more parts of itself all around, and had a few more leaks she would never get around to repairing.

The appointments book lay open on Edna's desk. She looked it over. It was their half day of office visits. They were solidly booked, starting with Faith O'Malley, who had colitis, Jack "Bozo" Kuzick, who was one of the cancer patients, and Jimmy Poirier, ten months old, whose hips were put in traction nightly. Thomas had to work at the free town clinic from two to five. It was held in the outpatient ward of the hospital, so he would probably cover emergencies. There was a meeting at seven of his doctors' group, the Cases Club, all men, at the usual restaurant downtown. Edna hoped he'd skip it. All they ever did was overeat, then push back their chairs after dinner and start farting and complaining. The new furnace he had ordered was coming tomorrow, and they would have to clear room in the basement tonight to get it in. Meanwhile she had a high

stack of Medicaid forms to get through, and she was three days behind in transcribing his notes to patients' folders. How could she get away for the baby's party?

She picked up the phone and buzzed Thomas. "I have to go out for a while," she said.

"What, Edna, now?"

"I'll be back in twenty minutes." She hadn't taken off her coat and scarf. She put her purse on her arm and left the office quickly, before he strode to the hall and leaned over the bannister, and tried to find out where she was going. Whatever she said wouldn't matter. He'd think she had slipped again, and would go out to buy something to—as if anywhere had opened yet, as if she'd wander through town in the fog and chilly air, knocking on back doors like the days of Prohibition. Thomas always spoke of it the same way: Edna's slipping, like she was one of the patients.

Madame LeMoyne's dancing studio was on the third floor of the Woolworth building. The store had been closed for eight years. There were tarps all over the floors, and sawhorses among the rows of empty counters, but nothing ever went on by way of renovations.

One end of the studio was Arlette LeMoyne's living quarters, separated by a flowered bedspread on a clothesline. It was open. The cot was covered with dancing costumes and heaps of Arlette's clothes. The drawers of a file cabinet, which she used as a bureau, had been stuffed with more clothes, and wouldn't shut. A small refrigerator, a hot plate, an electric kettle, a television set, a hair dryer, and a lamp were plugged into extension cords off a single outlet. Edna had carefully told Tiff, the older of her two grandchildren, what to do the day a fire broke out: keep her head and hurry calmly down the stairs, then run through the park to Dr. Mason's.

The folding chairs at the other end were for the mothers, but no one had stayed to watch. Sometimes when Tiff noticed Edna in the doorway, she came skittering toward her, and happily

took hold of Edna's hand and pulled her over to the chairs. Every time Edna sat watching the class, she was afraid Linda would show up early to pick up Tiff. One of these days it was bound to happen. Edna had rehearsed bumping into her. She'd gone over and over the things they would exchange by their looks, in the air above her grandchildren's heads. Even though it was Edna who paid for the lessons, she was sure she'd get up and leave if Linda wanted her to. Edna's son, Robbie, had been married to Linda for six years.

It had astonished Edna when he left her. And suddenly, Robbie wouldn't live in town anymore, like the other ex-husbands his age, in a bachelor pad, and go on taking work around town when he could get it. He would move out of state, coming to see his children for major holidays. He found a job in Miami with a building contractor, and now he was supervising, at new sites, the putting in of water hookups and sewers, and webs in the ground of cable and wire. It was a mystery to Edna how all of this had happened.

Arlette was near the record player. She taught tap and ballet, but for this class, the earlybird five year olds, she didn't expect much, just skipping. She wore a dark chiffon dress of the length called a tea dress. She was bare-legged, and wore cloth Chinese shoes. Everything about her was musty and soft and a little flabby. Her hair, Edna noticed, had been tinted again. This time it was whitish-gold. She wore it pulled back in a bun. With her soft face and her air of sad composure she reminded Edna of Peggy Lee.

"Hello, Arlette," Edna called. There weren't any mirrors like a proper dancing studio. When Woolworth closed, Arlette brought up the mirrors from the shoe department. For some reason there had been many of them—Arlette had found them crammed in different bins below the counters. She had set them at angles along the dance floor perimeter. She said she had done it on purpose, so her

girls would learn to look at their feet, and not their faces and hair. Here and there, shafts of dusty yellow sunlight glanced off them.

"Cue, girls," said Arlette in a weary voice. She saw Edna and waved. Then she spoke to a girl near the front of the line. The girl was plump and sturdy like Tiff, and wore the same type of black leotard. She hadn't put her tap shoes on yet, and swung them by the ribbons as she slid across the dance floor to Edna. "Mrs. Fleury!" she cried. "Tiffany had to stay home and help with the baby's birthday! She will be back another day!"

Arlette placed the needle on the record and the music started. The old building seemed to move back and forth in the wind, with a sound of rattling windows, as if the panes were part of the song. "I'll see you next week, Arlette!" Edna called.

Thomas was upstairs with an old man who had fallen in his shower and was scalded. In the waiting room were Monica Feld and her small son Roger; Suzanne Barker, who sat at the edge of her chair rubbing and picking at her hands; Bob Cheney and his wife Doris, who had come for the results of Bob's biopsy; and a man named Teddy Hamilton, from the plastics factory. He wasn't a scheduled patient. He had some kind of head wound. He held a balled-up handkerchief to the back of his head, but when Edna asked to see it, he said no.

After nearly five minutes of looking, Edna found Suzanne Barker's chart. It had taken so long because she had filed it under P, for Suzanne Psoriasis. "Mr. Hamilton!" she said. It had come to her that he might need stitches. The last time they had someone from plastics, it was a foreman who had been given a shot of morphine by the factory nurse. He had driven himself to Ivey Street and had arrived hale and hearty, and then fell back unconscious when Thomas said, "Your ribs are all broken. Every one."

"No hospital," said Teddy Hamilton.

"The doctor might be a while," said Edna. "You might need that sewn up."

"I'll wait. Can I go back to my seat now?"

"Yes, go ahead," said Edna. "Monica Feld!"

A blond skinny woman of thirty came into the hall. "He won't eat, Edna," she said.

"You mashing up his vitamins?"

"Every day. I swear to God."

"Send him out and I'll check his weight."

When Roger came out, Edna said, "What did you have for supper last night?"

He was eight. He looked smaller than the last time Edna had seen him. He had a mouth of bad teeth; he had thin brown streaks along his gumlines. "Lucky Charms," he said. "But I threw up."

"What about breakfast?"

"Lucky Charms without the milk."

"Can you do something for me, and keep it secret?"

The boy brightened. "I can. I'm becoming an X-men when I grow up," he said.

"Good. Did you notice the man in there, the very tall one who never ate vegetables, and hurt the back of his head? I want you to watch him. If he seems to be dizzy, like he's falling off his chair, I want you to come and get me right away."

"Is he going to die?"

"We don't know yet," said Edna. She looked up. Thomas was on his way from the bathroom to the exam room. He was gloved. Edna reached for Bob Cheney's report in its brown lab envelope and held it up. She pointed to herself and mouthed, "Mine?" Thomas nodded. Edna rolled her

hand loosely in a gesture of cranking. It was their sign that there was a bleeder in the waiting room, but she left it to Thomas to come and figure out which one. "Bob Cheney!" she said. His wife came with him to the hall.

Edna brought them to the consultation room. She told them to take the two good armchairs, and sat opposite them in the straightback wooden one, with Bob's folder in her lap. Bob's tumor rose up from the corner of his mouth to the top of his cheekbone. It was pink, as if sunburned, and more or less circular. Edna and the Cheney's weren't friends, but their sons had gone to school together. They knew each other the way everyone in the town knew who everyone else was. "How are things with you?" said Edna.

"Can't complain," said Bob Cheney.

"Must be different with you being retired."

"He deserved it," said Doris, and Edna nodded, although she wasn't sure what Doris meant. Until a few months ago Bob had worked for the gas company as a meter reader. "Early retirement" was what they called it, but as Bob knew himself, they'd let him go. How could they keep sending him to people's houses? The tumor looked as if a half-grown octopus had attached itself to his cheek, with its tentacles tucked up neatly below it.

Edna said, "This business with the pills Thomas has you on, did he tell you that you can't take a drink?"

"Oh, he would never," said Doris.

Bob said, "I hear he bought a new furnace."

"He did. I don't know where we'll put it. We've got twenty tons of medical equipment he's been storing down there. I said to him, 'So what do you expect? Do you think things can disappear just like that, just because you want them to?'"

"He works you too hard, Edna. I always thought so," said Doris.

"OK," Bob said. "Let's have it."

Edna folded her hands on top of the folder and smiled. "Thomas says to call if the blackouts come back. But otherwise, he says to tell you it's negative. You're as clean as a whistle."

"Oh!" they both said. Bob turned to Edna. "If there's anything you need, anytime, you let me know."

"Thanks," said Edna.

They got up. They were walking down the hall when Edna thought of something. She had seen the Cheneys' house only a few times, years ago when their boys were small. Gone there to fetch Robbie, she had never been past the kitchen, but she remembered how polite Bob was, and how Doris was fussy. The place had smelled like cleaner from a spray bottle. There weren't any houseplants or cereal boxes on the counters. On the burners of the stove were aluminum lids with floral designs, as if Doris wanted to hide the fact of cooking. The toaster had a quilted bunting with a peaked top. All the rest of the small appliances had covers too. Robbie used to say it was fun to play at the Cheneys' if all you wanted to do was watch television. It was a house of antiseptis.

"I'll get the car," said Doris.

Bob was near the door with Edna. "See you in a minute, dear," he said to his wife, and Edna looked at him. Had he grown his tumor on purpose?

"You on the up and up with me, Edna?"

"I am, Bob," she said. He took from his pocket a wide rimmed, floppy cotton hat. He put it on. He pulled it down so it almost covered the tumor, but this made Edna want to see it more closely. She wanted to run to the appointments book to pencil him in, in a bold square block for the rest of the day. She couldn't wait to see him again. She reached up and took hold of the hat.

When she pushed it back, he blushed deeply, and his eyelids fluttered, like a man who is about to be kissed. The color of the tumor stayed the same. "I'll send you a card in the mail for your next appointment," said Edna, louder than she meant to.

The office was still. It was after four. She should have left by now for Kitty's party, but kept finding things to do around her desk. The bag of gifts for the children—plastic blocks and a sundress for the birthday girl, and a book for Tiff—were in a bag by the door. Edna stood in the hall, wanting a drink, and was frightened.

She picked up the phone. She thought of calling Thomas at the clinic. He would come right away to help her, but he would bear her, she knew, another grudge. She dialed the number of the hospital and asked for the lab.

It was Margaret Reilly, Edna's A.A. sponsor, thank God, who answered. "Lab," said her voice.

"It's me," said Edna.

"Where are you?"

"Work."

"I thought you had to get yourself to Linda's."

"I'm trying."

"I have to ask you. You have anything there to drink?" Margaret's voice was calm. It was the tone she used on patients when she told them to make fists. It was said at the lab that she never lost a drop of blood someone needed.

"No," said Edna. "Not unless Thomas has something here I don't know about."

"Such as something you'd go looking for?"

"I'm calling you."

"Walk out the door and I'll meet you."

There was a pause. Edna looked out at the trees of the park, where fog filled the branches like moths' nests. Beyond were the buildings of the square. She thought of Robbie. He might have lied about his job. She tried to imagine him in a yellow hard hat, standing near a bulldozer, giving orders. But instead she saw him crumpled on a sidewalk, with a pink and orange sunset in the background, dead of a gunshot wound, dead of falling off a building, dead of a stabbing, dead of everything, at the age of thirty-three.

"Don't hang up on me," said Margaret. "Walk downtown and meet me at Coker's. I have to buy some shoes. I have to go to a wedding."

"We set a bad example for Robbie. Me and Gene."

"Divorce is not genetic," said Margaret.

At the shoe store, the two women embraced by a bin with a sign that said, "DESIGNERS OVERSTOCK, EVERY PAIR NINETEEN DOLLARS." Edna let go first. Margaret held her a moment longer. "I hate it when you smell me," said Edna.

Nina Coker was working the store alone. She stood at the counter tagging shoes. She wasn't one of their patients. Edna asked how she was, and Nina shrugged and said, "I had mono all winter. Don't ask. If you find anything that looks a little scruffy, I'll knock off up to forty percent. But don't spread it around."

Margaret asked Edna, "You like these?" She held up a pair of high heeled shoes in the brightest shade of turquoise Edna ever saw. Edna took them away from her. She hadn't meant to do this so harshly, but when she dropped the shoes into the bin, she swung out too far and hit

Margaret on the arm, and said, nearly spitting the words, "You'd just fall and make a fool of yourself, Margaret."

On the way to Linda's, Margaret didn't say anything. They didn't have far to go. The house that Robbie had run away from was a few blocks off Main Street, in a development of single family houses all alike. Why Florida, a place for the old, where people went to retire and die? Was he very tan? Did he carry his two children with him, curled behind his heart like two peas?

The house was still new. Linda had been pregnant with Kitty when they bought it. The street wasn't paved. Driving down it, Margaret sat there brooding and frowning. She deliberately made the car bounce too hard along the ruts.

"I'm sorry I said you'd fall if you wore those heels."

"Nina heard you," said Margaret. "Do you know whose wedding I have to go to? Brian Coker's. Nina's *brother*. And her other brother, Dave, who I hardly even know, is my *date*."

They pulled in the driveway. Margaret said, because Edna was looking down at the floor, "Look, no one's here. How late are you?"

"Not even half an hour." It was true. There were no other cars in the driveway. No one in Linda's family sat on the porch smoking cigarettes. The garage doors were closed. Linda's car was inside; Edna saw the antenna. The shades of the house were all down, but in an upstairs window there was a blue flicker of t.v. light.

"Did you get the time wrong?" said Margaret.

"She wrote on the invitation four-thirty."

"Maybe she filled it in wrong."

"She wrote it on the back too, Margaret. Looking forward to seeing you at four-thirty. Take me out of here."

"Wait. She's not doing anything you wouldn't do yourself. You'd do worse."

"I never took things out on Gene's mother."

"I'm leaving the presents." Margaret took the bag from the back seat and carried it to the porch. She opened the storm door and left it open with the bag propped against it.

"Drop me off at the park," said Edna. "I feel like walking."

Then she was halfway down her ex-husband's street when she realized she was on her way to see him. Gene's second wife's name was Diane. The smell of cooking rushed out when he opened the door. He closed it quickly behind him. A chicken was roasting in the oven. "Hi, Edna," he said, and sighed. "You want to come in?"

"I just came to tell you it's the baby's birthday."

"You could have called."

"Her name's Kitty."

"I remembered. I sent her a savings bond."

"How much?"

"Fifty."

Well, he could afford it. She didn't begrudge him how good he looked since he turned himself over to Diane's care. Gene worked nights on the maintenance crew at the cereal mill. Three or four mornings a week he went out to the Holiday Inn on the highway and lifted weights and rode a stationary bicycle. Overhead in the equipment room, he had told her, were banks of t.v. screens, and they were always playing a movie. Diane didn't want him getting elderly. How old was she? Forty, forty-two. Gene was sixty.

"Linda put the wrong time on my party invitation. When I got there it was over."

He looked away. Edna knew he was going to ask her if Robbie had called yet this week. He didn't want her to see his expression if the news were bad. Sitting in his house in his work clothes, in a pretty, chintz chair of Diane's, waiting for his supper, perhaps Gene missed his son, and was worried and baffled, same as Edna was.

"Did he call you?" said Gene.

Edna shook her head.

"I suppose you want to ask me for a ride somewhere," Gene said.

"I have my own license."

"I thought they took it for ninety days."

"It's up," said Edna.

"What do you want me to do? You want me to get on a plane and go down there and break his furniture? You want me to bring him back?"

"Come over tonight on your break," said Edna.

For a moment, she thought he was going to laugh at her. He glanced over his shoulder toward the front windows, as if Diane stood hidden in the curtains, like a giant ear. He didn't laugh. He said, "Are you asking me what I think you're asking me?" Edna nodded. He looked at her for a moment, then said, "This one time, or what?"

"I don't know," said Edna.

"OK," he said quietly. He didn't say anything else. He didn't say, "If Diane finds out about this, she'll kill me." But when Edna turned and walked down the steps, he called out, "Thanks for letting me know about the baby!"

Thomas was in the basement. It was six thirty, and he'd been down there for nearly an hour. Edna heard him walking around but not actually doing anything. She went over to the floor grate on the side of the hall and looked down at the white cellar light.

"If you're hospitalizing Roger Feld, we need a reason to tell Welfare. And I'm calling the furnace people to make them wait till next week." After about half a minute, he answered, "Are you talking to me?" That was when Edna heard the thud at the door, the sound of something flung against it.

She made it to the porch in time to see Linda drive away. It looked like she was alone in the car. At Edna's feet lay the bag of presents. They had been opened. The wrapping paper, wadded up, was in there too, with the loose blocks, the dress, and Tiff's book. Edna brought the bag inside. She went to the phone and called Linda's. The voice at the other end was unfamiliar; it wasn't their regular sitter. "I'd like to speak to Tiffany Fleury," Edna said.

"Who's this?"

"This is her ballet teacher."

"Hold on."

When Tiff came on, Edna said, "It's me."

"Oh!" said Tiff. "Thank you for giving me the book about the baby gorillas."

"Did you look at it?"

"Yes, Gran."

"What did it say?"

"It said, 'Once upon a time there was a little gorilla who climbed a banana tree.'"

"What was on the second page?"

"I forget," said Tiff.

"Did you remember I told you I'd come to Kitty's party, but then I didn't?"

"Yes. But it's because it was hers. And the only one you'd come to is if it's mine. Gran? I have to go now. My babysitter wants to use the phone."

Tiff's voice entered her slowly, and Edna carefully measured the way it reached her so that it took a few moments, after Tiff had hung up, to hear it all. She leaned back in her chair to receive it completely, like the sound of a bell in a buoy, and its echoes. For now she pushed the bag of presents under her desk. She'd figure out what to do with them later. Then she shouted down to Thomas that she was leaving, and she hoped he'd worry, like he was afraid she'd never come back.