

Winner, Writing Award 2020 for Short Story

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Class of 2022

A Good Day

1979

Dorothy coughed again as she shuffled her way into the kitchen, determined to check on her casserole before it burned. This damn flu: it picked a horrible time to make itself comfortable, and it had stopped her from getting things ready for Michelle's visit from school. She looked around at the mess in the living room, frustration rising, and huffed.

She crouched down, joints aching, and peered into the oven window. Motionless gravy under a stubbornly un-gratinated layer of cheese. Rats! How long had it been in there already? Was the oven broken?

She swore under her breath as she righted herself and the world swam a little bit. Oof. This flu was beating her down more than she had thought.

The front door's characteristic creak jolted her from her thoughts, and she turned, smiling, as she saw her husband and daughter walk in together. "Oh, Michelle! You're here!"

Michelle looked up, light curls falling around a tired-looking face. "Hey, mum," she said. Dorothy shuffled over. "Oh, mum, no, sit down, I'll come to you –"

"Nonsense!" said Dorothy. She paused for a couple coughs, drawing back. "Sorry, this damn flu - your dad must have told you about it when he picked you up. I've been laid up all week with it. That's why everything's a mess." She saw Michelle's eyes widen. "Oh, he hasn't, has he? Well, if he'd been good enough to actually be around the house to take care of it, maybe he would think to tell you." Dorothy turned to face her husband, arms crossing. "Where have you *been* all day, Clarence?"

A silence stretched uncomfortably long. She saw Michelle glance between the two of them and Dorothy deflated slightly. "Well, never mind that now," she said gently, taking Michelle's elbow. "You're here, and that's all that matters."

She paused for another coughing fit and felt Michelle's arms wrap around her, guiding her towards the sofa. "Why don't you have a lie down, mum? An ... dad and I will help pick up some stuff around here."

"Oh, you are a good kid, you know that?" she straightened, smiling at Michelle. "Coming all the way from college and the first thing you do is help out." She threw a look back at the doorway. "We did a good job raising her, didn't we, Clarence?"

He smiled. "I'll go set the table."

The two women settled on the couch and Dorothy watched as he walked past, making his way to the kitchen for utensils. "Oh," she said. "I just remembered – supper's not quite ready. I think the oven's broken."

He paused and looked ahead into the kitchen. "I'll, um, I'll take a look and see what I can do," he said quietly.

"Thanks, love," sighed Dorothy. She turned to Michelle. "My, you might have aged 20 years while you've been away," she tutted, brushing her daughter's hair back from her face. "I hope they're not working you too hard at school. Tell me all about it!"

2019

There was silence as they climbed into the car.

Click. Click.

Anthony snuck a worried look at his mother as she turned the ignition key and the little sedan coughed to life. She threw a glance over her shoulder, lips pursed, and turned the wheel.

Tock. Tock. Tock.

Another car whizzed by, and she pulled out behind them. For a while, there was only the hum of the road. Anthony shifted, resting his head on his hand as he stared out the window. "So ... is Clarence ...?"

"That was granddad, yes."

A pause.

"What was wrong with the oven?" she said.

"What?" he furrowed his brow. "Oh. Yeah, there was nothing wrong, she just hadn't turned it on."

"Oh." Michelle took a shuddering breath as they pulled up at a stop sign. "Ok." She looked around at the empty streets and then put the car into park, hitting the hazard lights. She slumped back, eyes closed, and let out a big sigh.

They sat in more silence, and then Michelle opened her eyes again, reaching over to her son.

"I'm sorry Tony, I was hoping you'd be there on a good day."

"It's okay, mom."

"Maybe tomorrow," she said, pulling her hand back and turning off the hazards. "Maybe tomorrow."