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Pause Between Acts

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**CAROLYN
WATSON**

Henry Joseph Adams set the breakfast table for one. His wife and two daughters were in Calgary shopping for wedding dresses. The eldest girl was getting married in three weeks and the task of finding the perfect dress had reached a frenzied point. Whenever Suzanne mentioned it, which was often, her face grew red and she talked in a hurried, high-pitched voice. The trip to Calgary was a last-ditch attempt to save the bride's vocal chords. If the trio came back empty-handed, Suzanne's head would likely blow off her neck and that would be the end of the wedding plans.

Henry did not mind eating alone. He preferred silence to the hullabaloo of family meals, though in truth he avoided partaking in most discussions by keeping his mouth full of food. Whenever his wife and daughters pressed him for his opinion, he merely nodded and kept chewing. The scheme worked well for everyone. The women took his silence for acquiescence and Henry ate more than allowed.

Lately however, wedding preparations had dominated the women's every conversation and escape of any kind had proved impossible. The women prodded Henry with questions. They begged him for more money or worse, they assigned him jobs, which he did his best to avoid. To his annoyance, indigestion and post-meal payoffs had become regular occurrences.

Extracting himself from the trip to Calgary had taken some cunning. On Friday morning, shortly before their scheduled departure, Henry had developed a sudden and inexplicable cough. He clutched his chest, let his eyes widen and collapsed into his favourite armchair. When his coughing fit subsided, he drew a ragged breath and wondered aloud how much longer he had to live. The women rewarded him with a short burst of angry concern and then hurried off to the airport without him. Henry had been feeling better ever since.

Without a hint of guilt, he bypassed his usual bowl of bran cereal in favour of a boiled egg, five strips of bacon and buttered toast. On impulse, and because his wife was not there to scold him, he added a sprinkling of salt. He had survived two heart attacks in as many years. He knew his time was limited and he took great pleasure in reminding his family of his fragile health. "I may not live to see the day you walk up the aisle," he told Suzanne. And to Jessica, "Take care of your mother while you're in Calgary. I won't be alive when you return."

His daughters despaired of such talk. They kissed his cheeks and made him promise to deposit the wedding money into their mother's bank account where it would not get lost in the distribution of his estate. His impending death put a skip in their step. Between them, his wife and daughters shared a quiet motto: Shop fast and charge everything while the old man is still around to pay for it.

Henry punctured the egg with his fork. He watched the yolk dribble down the side of the porcelain cup and pool in his saucer. He was, by his own admission, a closet gossip. He never spread rumours, nor did he admit to knowing any, but he took secret delight in hearing about other people's misfortunes. Suzanne, for example, had added three centimetres to her waistline since accepting the marriage proposal. She blamed stress. Jessica blamed the fiancée. Their mother blamed herself.

Henry turned the salt shaker upside down and gave his egg another vigorous dusting. He rather hoped he died before

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Suzanne's wedding. The guest list was a 500 and climbing, and she had chosen some absurd love song for the father/daughter dance. He did not particularly like Suzanne or, for that matter, Jessica. The girls had been seven and five when he married their mother. She was a young widow with a booming laugh and strong opinions. Henry was a lonely old man. People said they complimented each other. The wife's personality took over where the husband's fell short.

For the hell of it, Henry dumped a spoonful of sugar into his coffee. His wife strictly forbade caffeine so it was with a smile that he took a long sip. Perhaps a few jumping jacks after eating, he thought. Give the heart muscle a good workout. The women were due home late that afternoon. His body would be stiff by then. No chance of resuscitation.

He opened the classifieds and checked the obituaries. Two of his friends had died last summer, the lucky bastards. At their funerals, Henry had stared at their coffins with envy. "Soon," he told Jessica, "that will be me." And to Suzanne, "You should take notes, make it easier to plan mine." He had added a few surprises to his will, request for cremation being one of them. He had divided his money not quite equally between his wife, two daughters and the animal welfare group he had been secretly sending donations for years. How much money Suzanne received after paying off her wedding debts remained to be seen. Henry had half a mind to cut her off completely.

His eyes lit upon a name, his surname, at the top of the obituary page. ADAMS – Acacia Elsbeth.

There, that tugged at his heart.

She was gone.

And he was human after all.

He read it aloud, "Acacia Elsbeth Adams."

She had kept his name.

His breath caught in his throat and a sound came out. A single sob. He put his hand over his mouth to muffle it.

Acacia. Beautiful. Sweet. Cruel.

She would have laughed at the tears in his eyes. "Henry, you old softie. Why would you cry for me? We haven't seen each other in over four decades."

He pulled his hand away, called himself a fool. He tore the newspaper in half and threw the pieces on the floor. Still, the words were there. Acacia Elsbeth Adams. She'd kept his name.

Henry's mind drifted back forty years to the day she had ripped out his heart. He was reading a science fiction novel when she walked into the living room and dropped his packed suitcases on the floor. "Henry dear," she said, as he marked the page in his book. "I have decided to end our marriage." Just like that. The aliens had started to invade and his marriage was over.

She returned the ring and wished him well. "I called a taxi," she said, as she walked him to the door. "Good luck."

"Shall I get a divorce?" he said.

Acacia shrugged. "If you like."

She offered him her cheek and he kissed it, letting his lips linger on her skin. By the time he climbed into the taxi, he was a broken man.

For years, Henry had procrastinated making the separation legal. He thought, no, he desperately wished, that Acacia might reconsider and ask him to return. At night, he'd drive past her house, consider stopping and then chide himself for being so weak. Don't say it, he told himself. But the words, "I love you," inevitably slipped out as he drove away.

When he met the woman who became his second wife, he had finally admitted defeat. Quietly, he had had his lawyers draw up the divorce papers. He gave Acacia most of his money though she did not need it and as it turned out, did not want it. In the only correspondence he ever received from her, she simply wrote, "No thank you."

And yet, he had kept that slip of paper tucked in his wallet ever since.

Henry sat back, wove his fingers together and rested them

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on his chest. From his seat, he could see into the dining room where Jessica and Suzanne stored the wedding decorations. For the first time, he registered an abundance of bells amongst the piles – accordion bells for the walls, crystal bells for the top of the cake, plastic bells for the flower arrangements, bell-shaped lights for the topiaries, and in a slim box, chocolate bells for the guests.

“Every time a bell rings,” he said, “an angel gets its wings.”

If the saying were true, the wedding would be a bloody massacre.

He found his coat and walking stick. Suzanne had left a note stuck on the refrigerator. *Call us if you go out. We have the cell.* She wants to know where to find the body, Henry thought. Ha! Let her look.

The day was warm, the city alive with the sound of lawn equipment. Henry made his way through the tree-lined streets, stopping at the corner store to purchase a bouquet of flowers and a bag of candy. He ate as he walked. “You are a junk food fiend,” his wife had often complained. “That kind of garbage paves the fastest road to the grave.”

Not fast enough, Henry thought. Acacia beat me to it.

West Elbertine Cemetery was a sprawling city of grave-stones, mausoleums and towering columbaria. Henry wandered from grave to grave, looking for fresh plots. He found a flat headstone and sat, resting the flowers on his knees. Azaleas and rhododendrons bloomed all around him, their pinks and purples so brilliant they hardly seemed real. He did not believe in ghosts, but he believed in life after death. He imagined heaven as a kind of resort where the day’s agenda might be golf, tennis, or swimming. He would dress better of course. Everyone would. And he would eat well too. He would drink beer again. God, how he missed beer. Best of all, he would have his thirty-year-old body and his invincible ten-year-old heart.

After he had been in heaven for a while and maybe won a

few games of tennis, he would seek out Acacia. She would be sitting on a bench in the rose garden, her eyes hidden behind enormous black sunglasses. She would smile when she saw him and offer her cheek. "Why?" he would ask, resisting the urge to kiss her. "What the hell was wrong with us?"

Acacia's answer would be cryptic, perhaps accompanied by a slight shrug, but the point would be made. Behind the dark glasses, he hoped a few tears might fall.

Henry rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He felt closer to her than he had in forty years. After all, she'd kept his name. Acacia Elsbeth Adams. "I loved you," he said.

Empty, he gazed at the surrounding headstones. When his eyes lit upon one in the shape of a bell, he remembered Suzanne, Jessica, and his wife. He glanced at his watch. They would be on their way home from the airport.

With a sigh, he dropped the bouquet, flung his walking stick to one side and got to his feet. Jumping jacks! Ten ought to do it.