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## A Conversation with Tess

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S u m m e r   D a v i s

Maggie sat, slowly rocking. Her armchair creaked in the silence as the sunlight streamed into the living room, but she just stared through the curtains out the window. Her hands, clasped together, slid back and forth against her dress, while her heavy-soled shoes pumped against the shag carpet. Her brow raised slightly as a child's giggle penetrated through the walls of the small house and broke the silence. Maggie lifted her bony, wrinkled hand out of her lap as she leaned forward and pushed a corner of the curtain away from the window. Squinting, she could see two boys running to catch up to a young woman. The taller boy led the way. Head thrown back, he was shrieking with laughter. The smaller boy, too close to the ground to muster a meaningful stride, was trotting as fast as he could to catch up to his brother and mother, his sneakers sending clouds of dust up in the air. He too had a wide grin on his face. The young woman, distracted momentarily by a bird crossing her path, smiled and paused to wait for the boys.

"Kyle. Sam. Come on now. Daddy will be comin' in from the fields for lunch soon, and I bet you'd be sorry if you missed him."

Maggie let the curtain slide back in place. Her faint smile faded as she looked away from the window, letting her eyes scan the wrinkles of her

hands. The phone on the floor near her chair rang. She smiled and picked up the receiver. "Hello? Oh, David! There you are. I've been waiting for your call."

"Uh huh. Uh, well Mom, about our visit . . ."

"Yes? Are you running a little late? Course, I did kind of expect you to be on the road by now, but I know how it is, getting all the kids up and ready. Remember how stubborn you used to be? I had to hold a cup of water over your head before you'd even consider movin'. Oh, you don't know how nice it will be to finally see everyone again."

"Well, uh, I'm sorry, Mom, but I just don't . . . don't think we will be able to come out after all. Work called me and asked me to cover a story that just came up, and well, it just wasn't something I had the option to turn down."

"Oh . . . is that right? Well, that's too bad." Maggie forced a small chuckle to hide the shakiness of her voice. "So important and in such high demand, they can't bear to let you out of their grips even for a weekend, can they?"

"Well, I don't know; I guess so. Mom, I'm sorry. I know how you get prepared for us, making all your good bread and everything, and I feel bad, I really do. I was looking forward to it, and so were Jan and the kids; Emily and Tyler won't even speak to me." David quietly laughed. "Those two—you should be thankful we aren't coming; the kids have been such a handful lately. Jan is worn out most of the time."

Maggie let out another chuckle. "If you two would slow down and humble yourselves long enough to take a few pointers from this old lady, the kids wouldn't be such a handful!" Then her voice softened. "Oh, but Jan's such a good woman—so much talent."

"Yeah, Mom, I know. Anyway, I really need to go. I'll call you Sunday, okay? Uh, Mom, will you be all right?"

"Oh, heavens. I'm just fine. Don't you worry about me. You just better produce a darn good story. And I'll be waiting to read it."

"Thanks, Mom. Oh, someone's on the other line. See you, Mom."

"Bye, son." Maggie replaced the receiver on the phone, blinking several times as she wiped the moisture from her eyes.

"Oh, get goin' Mag," she muttered to herself as she braced the rocking chair and pushed herself slowly out of it. Grunting, she slowly straightened up as far as her back would allow and hobbled into the kitchen.

“Now what am I to do with all of this food, Tess?” A gray cat, sprawled out under the kitchen table, lifted its head and followed the old lady’s movement with its eyes. Maggie headed for the stove. Bending over, she lifted the pot’s lid and sniffed the roast. The water sizzled on the burner as it dripped from the lid. Two loaves of sitfa lay beside the stove, cooling on the cloths that were spread across the counter.

“They’re pretty anyway.” Maggie congratulated herself as she examined the perfectly braided loaves of bread. Slowly, she turned her back to the stove and limped over to the kitchen table where several papers lay scattered. Her hand raised up to rub her forehead.

“It’s about time to tend to these bills anyway.” She laughed. “I really am too busy a woman, you know, Tess.” The cat, tired of watching the old woman, let its head fall back against its paws as it drifted back to sleep. Maggie lifted one of the bills. She squinted at the figures and then let the letter fall back to the table. “Good night, if my eyes aren’t getting bad.”

Just at that moment, the kitchen phone gave a shrill ring. Maggie jerked around to face the phone. “Oh.” Maggie limped toward it. “David?” She whispered as the phone let off a second ring. She reached the wall and grabbed the phone off its hook, her eyes brightening as she put it to her ear. “Hello?”

“Mary?”

Maggie’s countenance fell. She looked down; her hands twisted the phone cord. “No, I think you have the wrong number.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no, that’s just fine. Good-bye.”

Maggie slowly replaced the phone on the wall and stood motionless momentarily before turning back toward the table. Sitting down, she picked up her glasses and pushed them onto the edge of her nose. Giving another sigh, she gathered the bills up to work on them.

As Maggie sealed the last envelope, she glanced up at the clock. Four o’clock. “Could have been here by now, Tess.” She turned back, running her hand across the edge of the table. Licking her lips, she glanced across the room. “Well, we can’t just sit here.” She pushed away from the table and hoisted herself out of the chair. Grabbing a rag out of a nearby cabinet, she turned to follow the well-worn path that led back to the living room.

Pausing near the entrance, she switched on the television set. Doris Day popped up on the screen. Maggie squinted at the screen and then turned and began dusting the fireplace ledge. “Ever notice, Tess, that the dust never fails to visit?” As she worked, a knock coming from the front door brought her head up. She straightened and looked toward the door. There, through the screen, Maggie could see her neighbor, June Facer, intently peering into the house. Maggie smiled and hurried to the door.

“Well hello, June. What a nice surprise!”

June smiled briefly. “Oh, there you are, Maggie. I brought you some tomatoes from our garden; thought they might sound good to you.”

“Oh, how sweet of you. Here, won’t you come in?” Maggie nudged the door open.

“Oh no. I don’t have time to even chat today. Things always comin’ up, you know.” June handed over the tomatoes to Maggie’s outstretched hands and then half turned, leaning on her back foot. “I just mainly wanted to check in to see that you were all right.”

“Well, can’t I at least offer you some homemade sitfa? Come on now, how often do you get offered hot, Swiss bread?”

Maggie motioned June to enter the house as she turned to head toward the kitchen. The screen door sputtered closed and Maggie turned around to see June still standing on the porch. Frowning her brow, Maggie turned back toward the door.

June bit down on her lip as she squinted, turning sideways. As she started down the porch steps Maggie fumbled at the door handle and stepped out onto the porch. June paused, cocking her head back.

“It really does smell good. At the town social, remember? I asked you for the recipe. I still need to get it from you sometime.” June had reached the last step and was glancing toward the gate.

“But, really, Mag, I need to be off. You don’t know how hard it is to keep things going with a house full of kids—don’t hardly have time to take a break.” Exhaling, June shook her head, rolling her eyes, but Maggie didn’t notice. She was blankly staring at the gate. June drew in another breath. “You just can’t imagine.”

June opened the gate and, turning to close the latch behind her, smiled at Maggie, who was still in a daze. “I’ll be back over soon, ok? Take care.”

June turned and took a few steps down the sidewalk before Maggie blinked and shook her head. She smiled lopsidedly. “Well, it’s good of you to take time to bring these over. I’ll sure enjoy them.”

Maggie glanced down at the tomatoes and then looked up to watch June retreat. The wrinkles around her eyes tensed; then her face lit up. “Oh, wait.” She took a step off the porch. “Your girl, Sara, how is she? You know she promised to come and let me teach her how to make bratzlies, but I haven’t seen her for weeks.”

June, already well past the driveway, let out a short laugh and glanced back, slowing down. “Oh, Sara is growing up. She is so caught up with her dancing and soccer practices, I don’t even see much of her anymore. I’ll tell her hello for you though. Good-bye, Maggie.”

June picked up her pace, disappearing around the corner. Maggie stared down the empty sidewalk and let out a sigh. She stepped back into the house, the screen door banging behind her. But as she turned to resume her dusting, she suddenly stopped, sagging forward.

“I don’t know; I just don’t have the spunk I used to have, Tess.” Frowning, she hobbled into the kitchen. As she placed the tomatoes on the table, something caught her eye. She was looking at a large book that had been carelessly thrown aside. Reaching across the table, she raised the book. “Oh, bother. What’s this sitting here gathering dust for?” Maggie opened it up and began to leaf through the pages. Slipping her reading glasses back onto the tip of her nose, she sat down. She smiled and bit down on her lip as she paused to read a passage.

*Melissa Crandall came to see me today. She thanked me for being her teacher all those years back—said I was the first teacher she’d had that made her feel like she could accomplish anything she put her mind to doing.*

Maggie squinted, still smiling. But then her eyes dropped and she looked away. “Oh, but June’s right; I wouldn’t know how to handle a house full of kids anymore.” Maggie’s smile faded, and she rubbed her forehead. “What is this old woman good for now?” Maggie rose and started to close the book, but in so doing her eye caught hold of the edge of a sandy-colored letter protruding from the pages. She opened the book back up and smiled. Tacked loosely to a journal page, the letter was crinkled, written with purple ink in big, printed letters. Turning to read again, she sat back down.

*I miss you, Grandma, because you always give me good food. Daddy says you could know how to teach me to make lace. I don’t like wiping dishes except at your house because you make it fun. Oh, and I’m glad you pray for us because Daddy always says that if it weren’t for you praying, something really*

*bad would have happened to me because that's what I deserve. I wish you lived with us so I could play with you all the time. Will you show me how to be you when you visit again? I love you soooo much, Grandma. Emily.*

Pulling out her handkerchief, Maggie lifted her glasses and dabbed at her eyes. She blew her nose—hard. “Dear little Emily,” she whispered, smoothing the wrinkled paper. She sat back and sighed, smiling, and then glanced down at Tess, who just stared back up at her. For a moment, she just sat there, staring at the cat. But slowly her grin broadened. Slapping her hand down on the table, she began to laugh. It was a quiet chuckle, at first, but then it grew louder, and soon her whole body was shaking with laughter as new tears began to stream down her cheeks. The cat cocked its head to the side, bewildered.

“Lands, what am I doing talking to a silly cat.” Maggie’s laughter quieted and she sighed once again.

“That’s it, Tess. I won’t have any more of this silence.” Maggie punched the air with her fist. “Good night, if David can’t come here, then I’ll just have to go there. Why, with Gilbert always insisting on me giving him something to do, surely he wouldn’t mind driving me to the airport. To think, Tess . . .” Maggie shook her head. “What a silly excuse to keep me here all of these years. My goodness, I need those kids. Why, yes, I do believe they need me too.” Her eyes sparkled as she pushed against the seat of her chair and stood up. “What am I just sitting here for? There’s so much to do yet.”

Turning to push back the chair, Maggie caught sight of the food still simmering on the stove. “Oh, dear me, the food—it’s still here, isn’t it?” Shaking her head, she grumbled, “Oh, Mag, what are you thinking. With this far-fangled microwave dinner craze going around, surely plenty of folks would appreciate some of this old-fashioned cooking.” Tapping her fingers against the back of the chair, Maggie stood there a moment, eyes looking skyward. Then, with a start, she straightened up.

“Leila, yes, of course. Why, here I forgot all about her, poor thing. Sick as she is. She and her husband could surely use a good meal right now.”

Turning back around, she glanced down at the book, pausing as she started to shut it. Gently, she picked at the staples that held the letter to the page. Setting the letter aside, she bent down to put the journal in the magazine basket lying at the foot of the table and then headed over to the stove. Tess followed her, running in front of her as she raised the pot holding the roast.

“What, Tess?” she grinned as she half turned with the pot. “You tryin’ to tell me that putting up with my gabbing gives you claim to this food?”

Tess purred and darted around the back of her. Maggie swung around to see where it was headed, losing grip of the pot as she did so. The pot banged against the floor, and chunks of meat flew everywhere. Tess reared back, ducking its head to miss the flying food. “Oh, you darn . . . oh.” Maggie patted at her eyebrow and gazed down at the mess. The room was silent. She turned to glare at Tess.

“What will I give . . .”

But the cat was already edging its neck forward to eye up the nearest lump of meat. Maggie started to shake with laughter once again. “Oh, Tess, of course you deserve it.” Maggie stooped down far enough to put her hands on her knees and watched, chuckling as the cat dove into the feast. Suddenly a sparkle came into her eyes. Straightening up, Maggie turned and shuffled to the fridge.

“Wait, Tess.”

Tess momentarily stopped and glanced up. It watched the old lady rummage through the fridge until she found a plastic yellow butter container. “Here it is.”

Maggie turned and grabbed a chair, dragging it slowly over near the cat. Tess had resumed eating. Throwing her arm behind her to balance her as she slowly sat down, Maggie looked down at Tess.

“Don’t you know you need good company to really enjoy a meal?” Tess, knowing on a piece of meat, looked up to see Maggie pull a Vienna sausage out of the container and slip it into her mouth. Tess continued to chew, its head cocked up toward Maggie as she reached down to stroke its back.

“Now, I hope you won’t be expecting me to up and drop the potatoes, too.” Maggie grabbed another sausage and smiled. “Shoot, Tess, how am I going to explain to Leila when I show up with half a meal? And what am I still doing talking to you anyway . . . ?”

And there they sat, feasting. Near by, on the kitchen table, a letter, written in purple ink, quivered from the breeze that drifted through the window.