

ALL THE DIFFERENCE

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*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

From "The Road Not Taken"

By Robert Frost

Chapter One: Friday, May 23

Tossing the script onto her desk, Dave Robinson told Laura, “Here, read this,” as he sped past. “The teleprompter is set, Sunshine. We go live in two.”

“Thanks Dave,” Laura said, not adding ‘you jerk’, although she wanted to. She hated Dave Robinson, producer for WCOL-TV5, and didn’t care that the feeling was mutual. Laura Mercer didn’t care about much except ratings, beating the local competition to a story, and looking like big-city market material. Laura knew she was the latter. She looked like the girl next door, and sexy at the same time. That’s what her adoring fans kept writing since she had leapt onto the screen in Columbus four years earlier. She was promoted from reporter to anchor of the noon and early evening news two years later. Already her name was a household word. Especially in households with male viewers.

Laura knew she was considered a draw at charity events. She agreed to lunches with local power brokers and marketing folks. Accessible, beautiful. And she was always perfecting her presence. Changing the tone of her voice, practicing inflections, tilting her head just a little farther left, or simply picking up a new adjective to drop into idle anchor babble. Laura was learning, absorbing, and mimicking everyone at the station. When the general manager asked her to do the news bulletin cut-in, she felt it was her big chance. Maybe this could lead to a network feed or even CNN Headline News pick-up?

Eschewing a read-through for further primping time, Laura arrived in the studio with twenty-two seconds to spare, Dave’s script in hand. Clipping on her microphone, she smiled at the cameraman, Rob. Soon, the cameras would be automated robots, but until then, she needed Rob

to like her. Glancing up at the booth where Dave sat hunched over the control panel, Laura sneered—but it could have just been a squint because of the lights.

“Ready and three, two, one, music . . .”

“We interrupt our regular programming to bring you a special news bulletin from WCOL-TV5,” the station announcer’s voice boomed.

Suddenly, Laura’s face popped into the middle of one of the station’s highest-rated shows, prompting hundreds of calls from angry show addicts. Laura’s hair was perfect—she was the brunette Breck girl. Her squeaky clean image had boosted the number-three station in town to a tie with the perennial number-one. The soft orange and yellow backdrop complemented her skin tones. Set approval was part of her contract by now, and she exercised it.

“This is Laura Mercer, News Channel 5, with a special bulletin,” she read from the teleprompter. “An hour ago, an explosion from unidentified causes ripped through a large home in Field City, five miles northwest of Grandville. Sources on the scene tell News 5 the two adult victims were airlifted to an area hospital in critical condition. We will have more about this story as information becomes available, and, of course, tonight on the eleven o’clock news. This is Laura Mercer. We now return to regular programming.”

“And, we’re out. Nice job, people.” Dave’s voice boomed from the control booth above the studio. Hoping to cover the story first, and thus smack an early, crippling home run useful for self-promotion for months to follow, he had obviously decided to break into programming with a news bulletin containing little news. It was May, sweeps week, a critical time to lure viewers to the station. It wouldn’t matter to him how stupid Laura would look, interrupting a program to give no news.

“Goddamn it! Heads are going to roll for this one,” Laura screamed after she’d removed her microphone. She held her breath then, waiting until Rob sauntered out of the studio. She needed him on her side until the studio was automated. The camera equaled power, since his choice of angles and camera position could make the difference between her nose seeming prominent or ugly. Someday she’d have the money to fix those faults, but not yet.

“Is it too much to ask to have a few facts before we jump on the air?” she yelled Dave, her invisible producer above. “I know this is TV news, but facts, some facts, are important!” Feeling better after the tirade, she walked out of the studio, back to her desk.

Over the speaker, Dave said, “Have a nice day, Sunshine.” Sunshine was the nickname he had given her two years ago when she arrived to save their sagging news ratings, fresh from a Dayton Fox affiliate. At first, he had seemed to like her. Six months later, he began complaining that ‘Sunshine’ was raining on his parade.

The public loved her. Laura knew most of the staff at the station hated her as much as Dave did, but the station owners—the only people who mattered in the end—decided she was their “it” girl. Her ticket was written. She was biding her time until an anchor spot opened up in a bigger market at a sister station. Her departure could not come soon enough for Dave or the rest of the staff, Laura knew.

Once back at her desk in the center of the noisy news room, Laura thought, *Today was intriguing*. For once, the news registered. She’d actually felt something, deep inside, almost like a stomachache, as she read the story. *It had to be his house*, she thought. *But who was the woman?* Even now, Laura’s heart was racing, and she realized her fingernails were drumming the fake wood veneer of her desk. Fortunately, no one else seemed to notice her agitation.

Turning in her chair, Laura yelled, “Tony, call all the hospitals in town. They airlifted the victims, so they’re probably at Grant or University. I want the names of both people injured in that explosion, and I want their status. Now, Tony, move!” Laura knew the stone-faced assignment editor couldn’t tell the orders were a personal request; she always treated him in the same demoralizing manner. *Consistency is key*, she thought to herself as she watched him fumble with the computer keyboard at his desk.

For a moment, Laura wondered whether anybody at the station would connect her to the explosion. No, she’d been discreet.

“Hey, Mike, is Headline News interested in a feed?” she called out to another editor, before jumping out of her chair to hover over his desk. This could be big.

CHAPTER Two: Three Weeks Earlier, Friday, May 1

Ellen Anderson could see the fork in the road from her kitchen window. She watched as cars chose one route or the other. Some drivers were confused, swerving at the last minute as they picked made a choice. Many seemed to know exactly where they were going. Only a couple had smashed into the tree growing in the median.

That's me, she thought. In the middle, smashing into the tree. Barren. Empty. Dead.

Hungry.

It was almost time for lunch. She stared out the window past the bright green carpet of grass at the acre plus of farm fields rolling behind her Victorian dream home. She expected her husband's red convertible Mercedes, top down, to burst around the back corner of the house any minute.

Michael's dark brown hair—thinning on top—would be tossed by the wind. He liked his hair like that—young, carefree. His six-foot frame folded into the front seat, and even in a small sports car, he appeared in command of the road, his home, his life, and of course, his wife. With his sunglasses on and his face locked in a grin, his music cranked, he still looked the part of the fraternity social chair he was when they met. Glasses off, he had lines at the corners of his eyes, golf squint lines, defining his thirty-eight years.

She didn't see him yet. So Ellen waited. She'd been cooking all morning. It was her hobby, really her only passion these days, and now, with the Internet, she could find recipes for anything. Everything had a recipe. Except, of course, her life. She planned, thought she had all the ingredients, but always, something was missing. Having finished cooking, she waited.

An observer may have thought that, standing there on her tiptoes, silhouetted by sunlight piercing the leaded glass panes, Ellen looked like a bird about to take flight. Her shiny black hair was pulled up in a high pony tail. Her dark skin, a tribute to her Brazilian roots, made the perfect contrast to the white countertops and yellow and white walls of the kitchen.

As with most things in the house, the countertops were built too high for her, a bow to Michael's height and ultimate say on everything, even her kitchen. After thirty-three years of feeling small, whenever Ellen wanted to feel empowered, by habit, she would stand on her toes and lean forward.

The last time she had done so was earlier that morning, as Dr. Burnhardt, her fertility specialist, murmured there was nothing else he could do and handed her an adoption brochure. He didn't seem to understand adoption wasn't an option for Michael and, therefore, wasn't for her either. She'd endured years of tests and humiliating procedures. All in vain. The dream home she and Michael had completed the year before was a family home, with four extra bedrooms and a large nanny suite.

"I'm so very sorry, Ellen, dear," the doctor said. Listening, Ellen fell off her toes. Her last hope was gone; she felt deflated, sub-human. Women were supposed to get pregnant and have babies. Weren't they? It's supposed to be natural. Why had she worried about contraception all those years? Maybe it was the miscarriage, she thought, and shuddered.

"But, you know, I had, had -"

"Yes, you mentioned the miscarriage. I remember dear. And while you were able to conceive then—I believe that was what, ten years ago, right?—your body changes, and conception is harder the older a woman is. It's a mystery. I wish we could control conception like we can

contraception. I am sorry, Ellen,” Dr. Burnhardt said again, sounding anxious to conclude the discussion and send his pitiful patient home.

Ellen thought she was about two months pregnant when she had lost the fetus. *I wonder if it was a boy or girl, and I wonder who the baby looked like.* The same questions floated through her subconscious often, never dislodged by the reality of a new fetus growing inside.

She was still dreaming of the baby she would never hold when she heard the sound of gravel rumbling outside. Michael had arrived home for lunch. They’d planned this date at home so she could fill him in on the results of her latest and final round of tests.

“Ellen, what did he say?” Michael asked quietly when he walked the door behind her.

“We won’t be having any children, Michael. I wish I could’ve kept our baby, the one we made,” Ellen said, turning, tears streaming down her face.

“Maybe it’ll still happen, Ellen. We need to get on with life. You know, maybe you should go back to work,” Michael said, trying to be calm, be nice.

“What about adoption, Michael, please?” Ellen asked between sobs.

“I’ve told you my feelings on this. I’m just not going to raise a kid that isn’t mine.” Seeing her tears, he softened his tone. “It just wasn’t meant to be, El. You know that. It’s OK. You can start up your career, or do that garden club or whatever. That’s why I put you through school. You’ll be fine. We’ll be fine.”

“You’re already fine, aren’t you? Where were you last night?” Ellen asked, quietly. She wondered why, if he thought she was as pretty as he said, why she wasn’t enough.

“Working.”

She turned back to the window then, as Michael grabbed the sandwich from the plate on the table and said, “Have a nice day, and don’t wait up. It’ll be another late night at work.” She heard the rumbling as his car pulled out on the gravel and then sped silently back down the winding driveway.

Ellen counted to twenty and then pushed the button to close the front gates.

“Well, I wanted a boy and we ended up with this scrawny thing,” he said to his girlfriend, who moments before, in a final agonizing scream, delivered his fourth child. Her first. Delivered in a twelve dollar hotel room so no one would know.

“She’s pretty. Just give her time, you’ll love her, you’ll see,” said the new mother, shaking as she cradled her newborn.

“I doubt it. I’ll see you later; I have stuff to do.” He left then. And he never came back. If the manager hadn’t found them, called the ambulance, they both would’ve died.

Subsequently, instead of celebrating her birthday every year, her momma dreaded it. Dreaded the day and blamed her daughter for her aloneness. For their poverty. For being.

By her second birthday, she’d caught on. She knew how to be quiet, to be like a mouse. She didn’t want to get a beating on her birthday. She didn’t want anything except for her momma to love her.

Janet Jones was lost, a stranger in her own community. A spectacle in the suburbs. Suddenly life as she knew it was over, so she stood, watching the traffic drive by, her typically coifed white-gray hair blowing in the divergent directions of each passing car. Some honked. There

were, she learned, two distinct types of honk. A short, light, beepish honk. Polite. Helpful. And the other. A firm, hard, blaring honk. Her presence near the street, in the gutter actually, upset the normal drive home for some people, resulting in an affront to their sensibilities and a loud honk.

“Oh, take another way home,” she yelled, teeter-tottering on and off the curb.

She didn’t know why she’d ended up here, on the road, at rush hour. Her yellow suit from the town’s best boutique was wrinkled and dirty. If only she hadn’t picked this day to come home early from work. *So, so stupid.* She’d surprise him at the showing, she had thought, and maybe they could go eat an early dinner. Yeah, what a surprise.

Janet noticed a car stopping next to the curb across the street. “Great, it’s Maddie,” she muttered ironically. Her friend, Madeline Wilson, the city’s gossip columnist to the rescue. *This is just what I need,* Janet thought.

“Don’t move, I’m coming to get you,” Maddie yelled to Janet as cars swooshed past between them. “It’s going to be OK. You’ll be all right. Don’t worry.”

Janet watched as Maddie darted—yes, she could dart at five-foot four—across the street. Her brown highlighted hair and small build made her appear more like a burglar caught in a heist than a guardian angel friend. Once she’d crossed to Janet’s side of the street, Janet noticed Maddie’s trademark pin: today it was a southwestern Native American dream catcher in silver.

“Nice pin. Maybe all of this is just a bad dream,” Janet said by way of greeting.

“Janet, please, come with me. I’ll take you home, to my house. We’ll talk.”

“It’s all over. He . . . he was fucking her in our duplex listing. There I was walking in like an idiot to surprise him, and he was having sex with our administrative assistant on our client’s white couch. Surreal.”

“You guys have been a real estate sales team and a couple forever. You’re in shock. Let’s get off the street, go have a cup of coffee or a drink. Come on.” Maddie said, gently steering Janet across the street and helping her into her Jetta.

Janet had helped Maddie find her home, her condominium in German Village, a historic district downtown. It was the first place Janet showed her, and she made an offer immediately. Janet had been friends with Maddie’s parents until her parents’ divorce. At that point, Janet’s husband remained friends with Maddie’s dad. Maddie and her mom remained friends with Janet. Fifteen years older than Maddie, Janet was a perfect surrogate mom when Maddie needed a working woman role model. They tried to have lunch at least once a month. Typically, Maddie needed Janet’s advice.

Today, the opposite was true.

Looking in the visor mirror, Janet saw she looked terrible, like someone had poured just enough water on her face to force her makeup to slide down two inches. Her mascara, foundation, even her lipstick was low. Her chin-length hair looked like it’d been in a tornado, and her suit looked like a crumbled piece of paper.

“Where have you been all afternoon? The entire Grandville Real Estate office is out looking for you.” Maddie clicked off the hazard lights and pulled out into the traffic. “I mean, by the time that receptionist called me, they were all at the end of their ropes. They’ve been looking for you

since lunch. Luckily some freaked-out commuter recognized you, Janet, and called your office.” Maddie punched in her lighter, waiting for it to get red hot as she paused for Janet’s answer.

Janet sat silent for a few minutes. She had been married to Chuck Jones for twenty years, and they were the top real estate sales team in the city for fifteen of those. A model of success in both work and home life. Parents of two boys, one in college, one building a life in Dallas.

Yet, out of the blue, her visit to the duplex had revealed the truth about the Joneses—Chuck was having an affair and Janet caught him in one of the homes they had listed. According to Maddie, a caller three hours later had informed the office Janet was roaming the streets of Grandville.

“I’ve been walking, I guess,” Janet said finally, staring out the front windshield of the car but not seeing anything. “You know, it’s funny, Chuck’s always made fun of the fact I’m a Realtor, but I can’t find my way across Grandville without getting lost, let alone Columbus. So today I just did what I’m best at: wandering. All of a sudden this town just seemed so small.”

“Janet, you grew your business. You had the sense, the clients. Chuck learned everything from you. You are the face of the Joneses of Grandville Real Estate. Don’t forget that,” Maddie said, inhaling deeply.

“I did everything he ever asked me to do. Did you know I always let him drive, just to make him feel important? At first. Now I’m just used to it. Sitting. Supporting him. OH my GOD, he was naked with ANGIE,” Janet sobbed, dropping her head into her hands.

Maddie drove out of the suburbs and back downtown. She pushed in her lighter again. “Maybe being single in my mid-thirties isn’t so bad after all,” she said consolingly.

“I’d gone over to surprise him, you know, during his showing. I knew he was showing the Hamilton house and it’s on a lock box, still furnished. I heard sounds upstairs. I walked in and his bottom was sticking up, you know. He was on top. It was so white, and his back had all that dark hair all over it and he was, disgusting. I couldn’t even see her, just him. She said, ‘It’s Janet.’ And I said, ‘Angie? Chuck?’ Like an idiot, I felt guilty at first, for interrupting them. Ha.” Sniff, choke. “It was all in slow motion.”

“I know, that’s what your brain does when you are in shock. That happened to me, when I was in that armed bank robbery in Nice, France. Did I tell you about that?”

“He rolled off of her,” Janet said, ignoring Maddie’s blatant attempt at a change of subject. “And I could see his midlife midsection and her young, firm body, and I turned to the wall and threw up. Not pleasant, but all of this seemed to last an hour and I bet it was seconds. It was gut-wrenching, actually. And then I walked.”