



Mississippi Spring

Fiction by Rebecca Cornwall

One Mississippi morning in his seventy-fifth year, Abel Lindley awoke knowing it was time to die. This was no sudden realization—he'd been considering the measure since the last of his strokes three years earlier. His daughters had long since come to this conclusion, now and again whispering to Eleanor, "Mother, don't we need to let go?" The elders, too, each time summoned out to the farm to give him a blessing, would query Eleanor furtively with their eyes. Even the bishop, who shrank from asserting a view, had (at the sixth such errand in four months) murmured, "This is what you want?" Eleanor was sure. Abel had been, too.

It was hard to say what had brought him 'round. Certainly not her. She had gotten him through a dank winter by sheer faith—that, and by fluffing his pillow, bringing him drinks, reading to him, playing books on records obtained through the mail; in short, leaving him no time to die. She showed every intention of getting him through spring and summer in the same way. And Abel's principle was to bear with her ceremonies with patience—not that he could do otherwise, being unable to talk, sit up, feed himself, or walk to the bathroom.

But this morning Abel lay in the dim, once-flowered living room, and he could smell April. He knew the Luxipalila River had subsided, the roads and bridges been repaired of mud. On the Tombigbee River bank, in the graceful front yards of doctors' houses, camelias and magnolias made their debut. In the Negro suburb by the creosote plant, jaunty youths languished outside corner stores in the evenings. In every yard, wherever a householder had made the slightest invitation, azaleas exploded in scarlet.

This morning April surrounded his own house and sent licks through crannies in the siding. Abel could almost see the dogwood shout delicately out of the vined forest that had once been his cornfield. He recalled how its fragrance had always recharged his blood, pushing him

outside to oil motors and sharpen plows. It wanted to do that for him today.

Here inside the house, though Abel could no longer see clearly, there were welts in the linoleum he had always intended to replace. Eleanor didn't mind the welts. He could see the shapes of curtains wilting at the windows, just as they had even before he slipped into debilitation. Eleanor didn't mind the curtains.

She minded only that he be with her. Hearing her hum and putter at the stove, he knew she watched the dogwood gleaming white and wild, perhaps a mockingbird dive-bombing a squirrel. Eleanor looked forward to many springs. She refused to consider that he might not.

After a few minutes, carrying a cup and saucer, Eleanor came lightly into the room and let up a shade. Out of the corner of an eye Abel noted how her housedress limped from her body. Her brown-grey hair too fell straight and unkempt about a face becoming thin with servitude.

He wanted to greet her as usual by forming some endearment with his tongue or barely lifting a large, flaccid hand. But his mind quickly formed another plan. Today as Eleanor approached his bedside Abel stared, unacknowledging, at the foot of the bed. When she touched his shoulder with that gentle keenness that belied her steel, he did not turn his head to smile.

"I've brought you some tea," she said in a flat tone softened by a drawl. With one arm she cranked the bed into sitting position. Then, as she had done each morning throughout the winter, she lifted a cup of Postum to his lips.

Abel did not sip. Nor did he bumblingly squeeze her hand in the way that said "thanks" and "I love you" and "good morning."

"Please take some," she urged, not impatient but immediately alarmed. He set his jaw. In a few moments she sighed and carried the cup away.

Soon she was back with the bedpan. Now Abel sighed: He did not like this, though he had

learned to endure it for her sake.

Lowering the bed, she turned him onto his side, slid the pan into place, and rolled and lifted him onto it. She could do this noiselessly, as she had borne their eight children. He could stiffen his back so as to roll more easily, but today he did not want it to be easy for her. She chastized him by moaning as she lifted.

Abel sighed a second time as he heard her dial the telephone, hang up, and dial again. It would take the Lord speaking out of a whirlwind to make her see this time.

Later, no longer humming, she worked in the kitchen. Abel lay in the greyness watching trees move across the ceiling. Shadows of oaks, ones he himself had planted. Ones he had been tending when Eleanor's sister called through the window, "You've got a boy." Their first boy, their only boy who lived, and scratchy from the start. Over him Abel and Eleanor had traded their only blow in all their years together. For the sole time (he'd thought) Abel had stood himself in her path and not backed down until he made her cry and see that she was smothering the child.

Her only seeing was the remedy. She wasn't a lioness, but a faithful hound.

He shut his eyes when she entered the room with his breakfast plate. She cranked the bed once again into upright position, then sat beside it, resting the plate on his covers. It wasn't easy resisting buttered toast, though he did it.

Her shoulders sank. "Oh, Abel," she said tremorously, placing a soft, thin hand on his forehead with such hesitance that he imagined for an instant he had won this easily. But when she spoke again her voice was clear. "I guess I had better call the doctor."

As she went to the telephone his eyes wandered up to the shadows. Like music they danced, gleeful yet melancholy. Like boy babies they danced, the ones he and Eleanor had buried together. Not the second, whom they had grieved, Eleanor at the sewing machine; he in the shed or field. But the later ones, for whom they had only wept, when dead things did not seem so lost to them. Even now it wasn't death

that terrified Eleanor.

She returned to take his pulse and blood pressure. He pretended to sleep. After she left he actually did doze until the clink of the doorbell nudged him.

"I cannot figure what's wrong with him," Eleanor said in even, resolute words to someone in the hallway. A moment later Abel's son-in-law—big, strapping—strode toward him.

"Doc says you got to be over by the window where it's sunny," said the son-in-law through chewing gum. First lowering the mattress, he grasped a rail and shoved Abel across the room as if the old man and his bed were of balsa.

In his new location Abel did not try to sit up or mumble something unintelligible to which the younger man could answer "Yeah, I guess so" and keep grinning. Instead Abel stared through watery, catarrhal eyes at the bare wall where he had been.

"He wouldn't eat at all this morning," Eleanor said to the son-in-law again at the door.

"Yep, something's wrong all right."

"He wouldn't take any breakfast. He always takes his meals unless he's sick."

"He's not hisself, that's for sure. You better call the elders."

Eleanor reentered the house as the truck pulled away. She stood for several moments in

the doorway then turned toward the kitchen. Abel sighed a second time as he heard her dial the telephone, hang up, and dial again. A loyal, faithful hound. It would take the Lord speaking out of a whirlwind to make her see this time.

By their youthful voices Abel knew who had come. He would have meant no offense had he been able to tell the elders he could not remember their names, though they had been here before. Even their faces were indistinguishable from a field of faces, beginning with those of the first missionaries who knocked on their door in the spring of 1935. Abel and Eleanor considered it a miracle the elders had found them and had answered this gift by housing and feeding scores of missionaries over the decades. Now when an occasional elder returned to visit with a wife and teenaged children, Abel could never recollect who he was or in which year he had stayed in their home.

Abel waited until Eleanor said in his ear, "The elders are here," before opening his eyes to two dark suits.

"How are you, Brother Lindley?" said one of the suits shyly. "We've come to give you a blessing."

Abel ignored her, so the elders proceeded. He resisted the warmth which entered his body as they spoke. He went deliberately to the shadows again, this time a daughter crippled with polio. They had found the Church by then and asked

for a blessing. The girl recovered. Once was all it took. From that time, whenever sickness or sorrow or simple orneriness struck the family, Eleanor called in the elders. When Abel attained the higher priesthood, she called upon him, until his powers failed.

Thus she had kept him alive, and he accepted each blessing of the past winter as right and appropriate. This one was not. The elders seemed to sense this, for upon "amen" they stood back, unsure. At the door one said without confidence to Eleanor, "Call us if there's anything we can do."

Eleanor waited for them to drive off before pulling an armchair to Abel's side. She sat with eyes closed, rubbing his chest. He stole a look at her tired face. He wished to say something to comfort her, but there was nothing to say. Tears flooded his eyes and jumped one by one onto a puffy, veined cheek.

He now knew that Eleanor had only begun her defense. That evening when he would not eat his dinner, she spoke again with the doctor, afterwards coming to his bedside.

"Dr. Pearson says not to worry," she told him almost defiantly. "If you can't eat tomorrow he'll find you a room in the hospital."

Abel stared at the ceiling.

The next morning an ambulance took Abel to the hospital. A needle was inserted into his arm, and nurses and orderlies took over monitoring his blood pressure while Eleanor watched from a corner. When once she came and touched him he turned his face to the wall.

Once too Dr. Pearson stopped in to read from Abel's chart, saying to Eleanor, "We don't know yet what's going on. Maybe he's just given up."

"But he's strong," Eleanor argued.

"I know," answered Dr. Pearson, patting her back. "I know."

During the afternoon a pink lady delivered something in a small vase. "Aren't they lovely?" Eleanor cried. Abel did not look at them.

In early evening the home teachers came, offering to give Abel another blessing. Eleanor told them the bishop would do so later. Abel was too weary to offer them sound or motion.

Toward night their daughters arrived. One took Eleanor to the cafeteria, the other keeping watch over her father. Several times Abel opened his eyes to meet hers and saw grief in them, though she smiled. Abel pressed her hand.

"Don't worry, Papa," she said. "We'll take care of her."

It was nine before the bishop appeared with his counselor. They conferred with the daughter in subdued voices. RELEASE HIM, Abel heard, and DON'T YOU KNOW WHAT MOTHER WILL SAY? Then Abel felt the bishop gently clasp his leg.

"Hello," the younger man said.

With effort, Abel looked up. The bishop seemed not much older than the missionaries. There

were milk stains on his lapel.

"Eleanor asked us to administer to you. Would that be all right?" This was said not in the officious tone of the doctor but as a quiet suggestion.

Abel only looked at him.

The bishop's counselor approached, removed from his pocket a small vial, and from it poured two drops of oil into Abel's thick white hair.

Even the Bishop, who shrank from asserting a view, had (at the sixth such errand in four months) murmured, "This is what you want?" Eleanor was sure.

Their hands were heavy on his head, the counselor's voice low and dissonant. No shadows now, no scent of azaleas stealing down the corridor. Only greenhouse buds in feeble jars for bodies that could not work or turn or move. From Abel's throat came a rumble of dismay.

The hands shifted and the bishop paused as he prepared to complete the prayer. Now Abel roused himself. Trembling, he tried to raise up from the pillow to face them. But though he put all his will to it, he could barely mobilize a sluggish tongue. Peering into the bishop's eyes, all he said was, "Nuh."

The bishop looked puzzled. Abel's gaze wavered and he sank into the pillow.

The young bishop frowned, trying to understand. He studied the old man's heavy, lumpish body and then, again, the old man's face. Finally not a whirlwind at all but a gentle light came into the bishop's eyes. Abel saw it and relaxed.

Eleanor had returned and stood waiting in the doorway. Seeing this, the bishop slowly, regretfully approached her. No one in the room, least of all Abel, could have prompted him what to say.

But he didn't have to say anything. Eleanor only glanced at him before she burst out crying. He hugged her as a daughter closed in on each side.

A short time later Eleanor sat on the edge of a chair beside Abel. She had taken his hand and now kissed it and held it tightly while the men resumed their places opposite her. Abel squeezed her fingers ever so slightly, then closed his eyes and rested.

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