

ON BEHALF OF A GRATEFUL NATION

By Jacqueline T. Lynch

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ROLAND BLODGETT: An 80-year-old widower.

BARBARA: His 50-ish-year-old daughter.

ERIC: Her 18-year-old son.

TIME: The present.

SETTING: ROLAND BLODGETT'S living room. Can be merely suggested with an old recliner, and several cardboard cartons.

AT RISE: BARBARA and ERIC move about the room with boxes, getting organized. SHE will fold towels into a box, look into several open boxes, HE will frequently leave the room with a couple of boxes, or bring others in.

ERIC: I can't believe he's giving me his car.

BARBARA: He told me he wanted to. I'm glad he wants to give up driving on his own and not wait until he's told he has to. I'm also glad for you.

ERIC: Grandpa's great.

BARBARA: Yeah, he's a pretty great guy sometimes. Other times, he's a bit of a mystery. Eric, I wanted to mention this before...it sounds sort of stupid, but I wondered if you could remember to be a little careful around him.

ERIC: Why, what do you mean?

BARBARA: (*Searching for words.*) Your models, your books and videos about World War II. I know all that's fascinating to you, but don't ask him too much about the war. He's never discussed it, you know. Not with me, not with Grandma. (*Looks around the room, taking it all in.*) I miss her so much. He does, too.

ERIC: Grandpa's been in my room before, he's seen my stuff.

BARBARA: He was a visitor. Now he's going to live in our house and share our lives. We have to be patient with him, and not crowd him too much. Give him his own space, you know what I mean?

ERIC: Sure.

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BARBARA: I don't mean just physical space, I mean emotionally. We have to let him be. Losing Mom was very tough, and moving out of the house he's lived in for the last fifty years is tough, too. *(Joking.)* Keep notes. You're going to have to do this for me some day. You're an only child, like me. No brothers or sisters to palm the job off... *(Steps away from her boxes, moves as though to eavesdrop.)* He's been on the phone for a long time. Who can he be talking to? *(ERIC leaves without a box, going into the cellar, exits. BARBARA senses her father's approach, does not want to be caught, hurries back to her packing.)*

BLODGETT: *(Enters, looking tense, tired, and troubled. HE watches BARBARA a moment.)* When you get to your mother's and my room, you'll see I already packed her things. Her clothes and jewelry and all her things. They're already all in boxes. I thought it would be easier for you. I know you miss your mother.

BARBARA: *(Touched.)* I do. Thanks, Dad.

BLODGETT: That's all right.

BARBARA: Who was on the phone?

BLODGETT: I got something to tell you and Eric. Where is he?

BARBARA: He's in the cellar. He'll be right back up. He's thrilled about the car, Dad. Thank you.

BLODGETT: That's all right, if he doesn't mind driving an old man's car.

BARBARA: What with college coming up, he's having a hard time saving for one. This is a godsend.

BLODGETT: I've had it ten years. Only got six thousand miles on it though.

BARBARA: Yeah, you and Mom were never big travelers, were you?

BLODGETT: No, I guess we were pretty happy right here.

(ERIC returns, carrying a box which is dusty, and has been in the cellar a long time.)

ERIC: The truck will be filled with this one, Mom. I'll have to come back and make another trip.

BLODGETT: *(Reaches for his box.)* Wait! Put this one down.

BARBARA: What's up? Everything okay?

(BLODGETT sits in his recliner, as if needing to recover his strength.)

Dad, what is it? You want to stop now? We've got all week.

BLODGETT: Just put the box down, here in front of me.

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(ERIC puts the box down. BLODGETT opens it, and looks for something.)

BARBARA: So, what was that phone call about, Dad?

(BLODGETT searches through box, takes out an old black-and-white portrait photo of a man in uniform. HE looks at it a long time, as if forcing himself to look. Then HE hands it to BARBARA.)

(SHE is pleased.) Is this you? Eric, look at your grandfather in his Army uniform.

BLODGETT: It's not me.

ERIC: Who is it?

BLODGETT: It's my brother.

(Both ERIC and BARBARA are surprised.)

BARBARA: Your brother? You're an only child. Dad! You never, ever said....

BLODGETT: I became an only child. I didn't start out that way.

BARBARA: What happened? Can you...do you want to talk about this?

BLODGETT: I said I had something to tell you and Eric, didn't I? His name is Ronald. Good looking guy, ain't he? I'd forgotten, mostly. He was older by three years. The thing is, we never got along. Some brothers fight, I don't know why. We just never got along. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps the day after Pearl Harbor. I was still in high school, but when I graduated in 'forty-three, I joined up, too. I was still in training when my parents got the telegram.

BARBARA: He was killed.

BLODGETT: He was missing, presumed dead. Worse than being killed, if you ask me. At least you know. Something awful about not knowing. It was for my folks.

BARBARA: *(To ERIC.)* I never knew my grandparents. They both died before I was born.

BLODGETT: Once when you were a kid you rode your bike down to the new shopping plaza and we didn't know where you were. I got in the car and looked for you all over the place. When I found you, I could have killed you.

BARBARA: I remember. I never left the front yard after that. Until I was thirty. *(To ERIC)* I'm kidding.

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BLODGETT: I was just so relieved. That's something my parents never got. I think my mother was always imaging Ronald lost, like she could keep him out of danger if she could just find him in time. They wanted me to get out of the Army on a hardship discharge, but I wouldn't. I went to Italy with my outfit. My dad died while I was overseas, a heart attack. Mother blamed me.

BARBARA: Oh, she couldn't have.

BLODGETT: I think she did. She moved to Michigan to live with her sister. After the war she remarried. We lost touch. This box of stuff with Ronald's picture, this was sent to me by her stepchildren after she died. I just put it down the cellar, figured I would deal with it someday. I never meant it to be this long.

BARBARA: Amazing. And you never found out what happened to him?

BLODGETT: Yes, Barbara, I did. About six months ago I got contacted by the government. They found a plane, and the remains of a flyer out on some island in the Pacific.

BARBARA and ERIC: What? Wow! Really?

BLODGETT: Yeah, they figured it was Ronald, but they had to do forensic testing. They know for sure now. They're going to give me what's left of him.

BARBARA: Oh, Dad.

BLODGETT: I'm going to put his remains in the plot I have for your mother and me, and put his name on the headstone. Least I can do.

BARBARA: Did Mom know about any of this?

BLODGETT: I told your mother all this, when the government first called about finding the plane. I did finally tell her, Barbie. I should have come clean about it with her a long time ago. We never had any secrets. I'm glad I got to tell her in time. I would've felt terrible if she'd gone and I never said anything. I want you to help me with the funeral, okay?

BARBARA: Funeral?

BLODGETT: You know, just a little something. A small service and a burial of his remains. It's his right.

BARBARA: (*Acquiescing without enthusiasm.*) Okay. Yeah, sure, okay.

BLODGETT: You don't want to, do you? So soon after your mother's?

BARBARA: No, I'll do it. Of course I'll do it.

BLODGETT: I understand. I don't want this, either, but I have to.

BARBARA: I know.

BLODGETT: I have to. I have to make things right.

BARBARA: I understand, he was your brother.

BLODGETT: Because I hated him so much.

ERIC: You hated him?

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BLODGETT: That's why I didn't go for a hardship discharge. I didn't want to get out of the service just because my brother was a hero. It wasn't being patriotic, so don't think that. I guess I didn't really hate him. It was just a younger brother's resentment. We never got along, he and I, that's all it was. I'm ashamed of it now. I was so ashamed of it all these years, I never brought up his name. You don't really learn what hate is until you go to war. Well, slogging all through Italy with the infantry was better than going home and being the brother of a hero. I'd have to hear about it all the time. My mother knew, though. She knew the real reason. My pettiness. She never forgave me.

BARBARA: It's all right Dad. It's over, now.

BLODGETT: (*Bitterly.*) Neither of you know about things like that, about sibling rivalry. You're both only children, so you have an idealized picture in your heads about how brothers or sisters should be. As idealized and sentimental as Eric's war collection. (*To ERIC.*) The funeral director is going to give me a flag in memory of Ronald. All folded up in a triangle. You know, you've seen them.

ERIC: Yeah, Grandpa. I know.

BLODGETT: It's what my mother would have been given if Ronald was declared dead and not just missing. She never got that. I want you to have it. I want you to put it up in one of those display cases on your wall with all of your other war stuff, your model planes and such....

ERIC: (*Bristling.*) I can take that junk down, Grandpa, if that bothers you.

BLODGETT: You don't even know what it's about.

ERIC: (*Defensive.*) I do know.

BLODGETT: You know nothing. You know what war is like, like you know what having a brother is like. You know statistics and shoulder patches and cool decals painted on the nose of the plane. You know nothing of the smells and the sounds and memories you wish would go away. I wish I could tell you, but I can't. I just can't.

BARBARA: Take it easy, Dad. Eric's a smart young man. He'll figure things out for himself. Like I did.

BLODGETT: You were a girl, so I never talked tanks and brothers with you. Funny thing, the guys in my outfit, they became like my real brothers. I loved them, even the ones I didn't like very much. I guess putting yourselves on the line for each other is a kind of love. Maybe I can transfer that soldierly love to my brother. So, this is what I figured out to do... (*To ERIC*) When I die, they'll give your mother a flag, for me, on behalf of a grateful nation. That's how they say it. (*To BARBARA*) Give it to the boy. (*To ERIC.*) Put it on the wall next to Ronald's flag. Bring us together, finally. Do that.

ERIC: Okay, I will. I'll do it.

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BLODGETT: Promise, now. It might seem like a little thing, Eric. But, I'm trusting you with a family debt of honor.

ERIC: I promise, Grandpa. You can trust me.

BARBARA: *(At a loss.)* It's okay, Dad.

BLODGETT: It is now. *(Nods to the photograph.)* You want that? You might as well take it. Everything in the box is going to be yours, anyway.

BARBARA: *(Only half kidding.)* Any other secrets I should know about?

BLODGETT: Nothing that's any of your business.

(ERIC laughs, BARBARA is stunned.)

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