

FROM

Acts of God

BY ELLEN GILCHRIST



Because of the hurricane on the coast, the sitter was two hours late to the McCamey house that Saturday morning. The hurricane had not affected Madison, Georgia, but it had affected the sitter's son, who had made the mistake of moving to New Orleans the year before. So the sitter had been on the phone all Saturday morning trying to placate her sister in Texas who had taken the son and his girlfriend in and was getting tired of them, especially the cats, which the girlfriend had insisted on bringing to the sister's house.

Because the sitter was late, Mr. William Angus McCamey and Mrs. Amelie Louise Tucker McCamey were alone from seven on Friday night until ten forty-five on Saturday morning, after which it didn't matter anymore whether the sitter was watching out for them.

"I can't stand the bacon she buys," Amelie had begun by saying, at six that Saturday morning when she was trying to get some breakfast going on the new stove her daughter, Anne, had moved into their kitchen the week before. "It won't crisp no matter how long you cook it."

"It's the milk that gets me," Will joined in. "I'd just as soon go on and die as drink that watered-down milk she gets."

"Cream," Amelie added. "It doesn't hurt to have cream for the coffee."

"Let's make some real coffee," Will said. "I'll make it. Where's our percolator." He opened a cabinet and got out the old percolator they had bought together at Lewis Hardware forty years before and took it down and went to the sink and rinsed it out and filled it with water and found the real coffee behind the sugar and started measuring it in.

Amelie passed behind him on her way to get some paper towels for the bacon and he stopped her and put his hands on her back end and held them there. “Bad boy,” she said. “Let me finish with this bacon.”

AMELIE AND WILL had been in love since the eighth grade at Madison Junior High when Will was the quarterback of the junior high team and Amelie was a cheerleader in a wool skirt that came down below her knees and a white wool sweater with a large *M* just in front of her new breasts. This was back when cheerleaders watched the football games and only got up to cheer when the team was having a timeout.

The Madison Junior High was a three-story brick building on Lee Street, and it was still in use as a grade school, kindergarten through sixth grade. Many of their fourteen grandchildren and twelve great-grandchildren had gone to school there. Their great-grandchildren played in the school yard where Will gave Amelie her first kiss and where he had pushed her on the swings when the swings were twice as high as the safe ones they have now.

It was in a neighborhood that still boasted mansions and pretty wooden houses, but the houses were inhabited now by people who commuted to Atlanta and weren't from old Madison families like the McCameys and the Tuckers and the Walkers and the Garths. None of the new people belonged to the Daughters of the American Revolution, much less the Children of the Confederacy, and none of them ever came by to say hello to Will and Amelie or tell them they lived in the neighborhood.

Will and Amelie still lived in the white wooden house their daddies had bought for them the week it was discovered they had run off to South Carolina to be married, and with good cause, after what they had been doing after football games the fall they were seniors in high school. Will was the quarterback of the high school team and Amelie had given up being cheerleader to be the drum major of the marching band. Amelie and Will had been in love so long they couldn't remember when it began, although Will said he remembered the first kiss and how the leaves were turning red on the maple trees on the school yard. “They couldn't have been turning red,” Amelie always said. “I had on a blue cotton dress with yellow flowers embroidered on the collar. I would not have been wearing that to school in October.”

At eighty-six they were still in love and they did not forget what they had

done on the front seat of Will's daddy's Ford car or on the screened-in porch of Amelie's Aunt Lucy's house in the country.

Walkerrest, the house was called, with two *r*'s, and it was there that things first got out of hand. Amelie was caring for her aunt one football weekend while her aunt's husband was at a Coca-Cola board meeting in Atlanta. The aunt was crippled from a childhood illness and had no children of her own, but she had a face as lovely as an angel's and never complained or blamed God for having to stay in a wheelchair most of the time.

Will and Amelie did not forget that night at Walkerrest, or later, lying in bed in their new house with Amelie's stomach the size of a watermelon, sleeping in the four-poster bed in the house where they would live for seventy years.

The first baby was a boy named William Tucker, so he wouldn't be a junior, and after him were Daniel and Morgan and Peter and Walker and then Jeanne and Jessica and Olivia and Anne.

In all the years Will and Amelie lived in the house they never went to bed without burying their hatchets and remembering they loved each other. They had a gift for being married and they were lucky and they knew it. They even kept on knowing it when their twin boys died at birth and had to be buried out at Walkerrest with their ancestors.

The sitter had come to live with them when they were eighty-four, a year after they had to quit driving and a year before they made their children get the sitter a house of her own.

"Or we shall surely go insane," Amelie protested. "She watches television all day long or listens to the radio. She is not always nice to us. We cannot live with that all day and night."

"Night and day," William added. "We have telephones in every room. We won't both break our hips at once with no one looking. Or if we did then the laws of chance will have triumphed over human caution and we will accept our fate."

"Amen," Amelie said. "We cannot have her here all day and night. We do not deserve this unkindness."

"We'll get a different lady," their daughter Olivia protested.

"They are all the same," Will said. "We have tried four. Each one is like the rest. Who would have such a job, watching old people to keep them from driving their car?"

“Or drinking sherry in the afternoon,” Amelie added. “As if I ever had more than two small sherries at once in my life.”

“All right,” their daughter Anne agreed. “We will get her a place nearby and she can be here in the daytime.”

“From ten until four,” William bargained.

“From seven to dark,” Anne said.

“A costly cruelty,” Amelie charged.

“The insurance pays,” Olivia said. “You know that, Momma. And you know we love you.”

THE NEW SITTER PROGRAM had been in place for seven months when Hurricane Katrina came across Florida and grew into a typhoon and slammed into the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and Louisiana and caused the sitter’s son to flee to Texas with his girlfriend, causing the sitter to have to stay on the phone for two hours begging her sister not to kick them out until they found another place to stay. Then to sit and cry for another hour and dread going to the McCameys’ house to have Mr. and Mrs. McCamey keep asking her to turn down the television set. I’ll just stay home and watch the stories in my own house, the sitter told herself. I’m depressed from this hurricane and I hate my selfish sister and I wish her husband would just shoot the cats or take them to the woods and turn them loose. The sitter cried long and bitter tears and then opened a package of sweet rolls and sat down to watch the news on her own television set.

At seven thirty she called the McCameys’ house to tell Mr. McCamey she would not be in until later in the day, perhaps not until afternoon.

At seven forty-five Will finished his third cup of coffee and polished off his eggs and told Amelie, “Let’s go to the store. I am tired of that white-trash woman telling us what to eat. Let’s go shopping.”

“In the car?” Amelie asked, giggling.

“In our car,” he answered.

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