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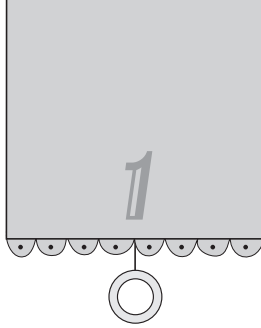
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Ever notice that everyone is trying to accomplish something big, not realizing that life is made up of little things? Somebody other than me said that, but the older I get, the more I realize it's the truth.

My name is Maude Diamond, and I'm struggling with a lot of little things in my life. I look back on the last eighteen months and thank God for a strong heart, because otherwise I'd have never survived life's upheavals: my husband's unexpected death, my eighty-seven-year-old mother-in-law's moving in with me, my only daughter coming home after her philandering husband's demise. I don't recall who said it—I only know that I agree: Life is a test, and I didn't take very good notes.

Gunshots coming from the living room deafened me. Stella had the TV jacked up to sonic blast. Outside my office window, fall trees put on a splendid display, temperatures in the low seventies—much too nice a day to sit in the house and work. But work I must, because suddenly I hit sixty and I find myself with a full house, a bushel of bills, and a wagonload of responsibility.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

Looking out my office door I could see that Cee's—that's

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my thirty-one-year-old, recently widowed daughter—poodles had each other in a canine death lock in the middle of the front-room floor. Captain, our newly acquired cat, sunned himself in the bay window, his tail switching calmly back and forth. But I know the temperamental feline's mood, like those of the three women in this house, can change in a heartbeat.

I've decided that God is still teaching me after all these years. After Herb's death I believe He tried to impress on me the importance of love. Shamefully I admit maybe I didn't give that one commandment a lot of thought. Oh, I loved Herb, and I love our daughter, but I've had to work on loving other people, opening up the doors of my home, my personal domain—and my heart—without resentment.

I'm still working on the lesson.

I tried to focus on the last paragraph I'd written. *Concentrate, Maude*. Monthly bills weighed heavily on my mind. My agent, my publisher, and popular television evangelist Jack Hamel had been so fired up to hire me to ghostwrite Jack's newest book that I thought they would move heaven and earth to hand-deliver the contract and advance royalties check. But twenty years in the writing business had convinced me literary agents and the publishing world worked on their time, not my time.

Hitting Control S, I leaned back in my chair, giving the top of my graying head a good scratch. Why do brainy things make your head itch? or throb? or at times feel like it's going to explode—blow up and scatter nasty-looking particles all over the desk? I grinned, proud of the fact that as bad as it was, I could still smile.

"Stella!" I yelled. "Can you turn it down a notch?" Like my mother-in-law could hear anything over the car chase and *rat-a-tat-tat* of machine guns going off in the living room. I often

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wondered why she didn't like chick flicks—quiet movies with quiet people.

I knew the moment I heard Arnold Schwarzenegger's voice that I was in trouble. My mother-in-law hadn't heard a word I said.

Sighing, I got up and walked into the living room, tying the sash on my corduroy robe. Why did I even bother to try to concentrate? If I'd ever had flashes of muse, they had flown out the window years ago. Now I wrote out of obedience. Writing is hard, lonely work, and don't let anyone ever tell you different. Baring your heart and soul on paper for others to criticize and pick apart is not easy.

I know I sound harsh and ungrateful; it's a phase I go through periodically. I whine and complain and feel completely out of control when a deadline looms, like now, but writing is what I do. I'll be all right once I get over "deadline fever." Jack Hamel's book had to be on the publisher's desk by February 1. One glance at the calendar and I knew I had a little over three months to complete the project, then get back to my own work.

Often I worry that Maude Diamond's stuff isn't worthy of a single tree that it takes to make paper. But God must have thought I could help or that my work would speak to someone, so when anyone asks if I'm *passionate* about writing, my answer is "I'm passionate to have written."

That's the difference.

"Stella!" The stench of roast boiling dry came to me. "Can you check the roast? I think it needs water!"

"Okay!" My mother-in-law roused herself out of the recliner and shuffled into the kitchen.

The poodles split apart and broke into a lope, chasing each other around the coffee table. A potted philodendron toppled to

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its side, and the animals tramped dirt into the carpet. And it was only 9 A.M. I turned and went back to my office.

Stella returned from the kitchen and sat down.

When she wasn't involved in amateur town sleuthing—which, at the moment, she wasn't—Stella seemed without purpose. A fish out of water. A squirrel looking for a nut to crack. Reaching for the crocheted afghan on the back of the chair, she swathed herself in the yard of red yarn and lay back, her upper plate resting lopsidedly across her chest.

What a picture that made.

She and Morning Shade's self-appointed law official, Hargus Conley, had cracked the furniture-moving-bandit case three weeks ago. Now Stella was back to waiting for death and gossiping over coffee at the local Citgo every morning.

This small Arkansas town isn't a hotbed of crime, so cases for an elderly woman come few and far between. Actually, there's only been one of any consequence since I've been here—the night Mildred Fasco's grandfather set fire to the gas station to protest inflated pump prices. My. Was that thirty years ago? Herb and I had been newlyweds. How much could regular have been back then? Sixteen—eighteen cents a gallon?

But there was the furniture-moving-bandit case last summer. That turned out to be Simon Bench, who has a case of terminal neatness. He'd gone into neighbors' houses and rearranged furniture, replaced knickknacks, and even hung new drapes at one place.

Tired of trying to write, I reached for the morning paper. I had carried it to my office to keep Stella from making off with it. After she had finished reading the obituary column, she felt she had wrung all the juice out of the news, so to speak. If I wanted to read it I had to grab it before it hit the trash.

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The front-page lead article was about a chain letter that apparently everyone in town had received—everyone but me. A chain letter? These days? I wondered how I had missed out on that. Why would anyone mess with a chain letter anyway? They were nothing more than a pyramid scheme, and illegal to boot. I suppose some chain letters are harmless, like the ones that ask for an apron or a handkerchief, although who in this modern age wore an apron or used a handkerchief?

I read the article carefully, learning that it was your typical chain letter. The person who received it was supposed to send five dollars to the top name. Five dollars they might as well burn—and a lot of money, considering how broke I was at the moment.

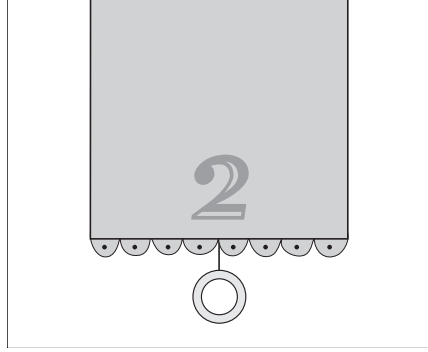
I took a little time to multiply five dollars by Morning Shade's population—ninety families—and the amount was hefty. I could sure use that much cash, but I quickly scuttled the thought. I didn't think I could come up with an excuse for the windfall that God would find acceptable.

But it was a nice thought while it lasted.

Propping my chin in the palm of my hand, I stared at the blank computer screen, trying to figure out how I was going to write Jack Hamel a best-seller when I couldn't *buy* one for myself.

Whoever said when a person gets older the best years of life are still ahead couldn't have been serious.

Either that—or I'd missed the point completely.



Across town, CeeCee Tamaris stood on tiptoe, straining her five-foot-two frame to slide a flyer into the metal mail case. Morning Shade's daily postal routine was in full swing this morning. She smiled at a whistling Ty Hardin, who pushed a cart across the polished floor. She liked Ty's attitude, the boyish twinkle in his blue green eyes, and the way he stayed out of her way—but always close by if she needed a box or a heavy cart moved.

If anyone rightfully deserved to wear sackcloth and ashes, Ty did. Iva Hinkle said Marlene Walker, Ty's young bride, had died in a school shooting three years back, and Ty couldn't get over it. The couple had been married little more than two months when a young freshman had brought a gun into the Little Rock school cafeteria that fateful morning. Three families were forever altered that day: Ty's and those of two other husbands who had kissed their wives good morning and left without knowing their lives were about to change.

CeeCee's thoughts turned to the disappointments life had thrown her—sliding curveballs, actually.

This would be her first Christmas without Jake.

The thought stung and threatened to spoil an otherwise good

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start to the fall morning. Even if Jake had proved to be a no-good, overinflated-ego, skirt-chasing jock, that hadn't made his death any easier. Cee shoved catalogs into the case and bit back ready tears. She had to admit her mood hadn't been the most charitable lately, but then thinking about the holidays always put her in a funky mood. That and the extra fifteen pounds she'd put on since she came home. You could add the staggering amount of mail increase for the approaching holiday season, and now some nut had started sending out chain letters—least that's what they looked like. She wished she could tell that idiot just how much extra work his or her criminal act had created for hardworking mail personnel.

She stuck the last envelope in the case and tried to make a convincing argument that her Hanes weren't cutting off circulation to her thigh line: they'd simply shrunk in the wash.

Iva Hinkle was giving her the eye this morning. She'd been on the job almost four months now, and the postmistress—and close friend—still kept a sharp lookout for mistakes. Happily CeeCee had made very few. She took to mail delivery like a catfish took to Wheaties balls. She glanced at the clock to see how time was running: 9:15. Perfect. It took her a little over three hours to sort the route by flyers, sizes, box holders. She focused on the canvas laundry cart that contained parcels. For the next thirty minutes she'd red-band the packages by addresses before she pulled down her mail and stacked the rubber-banded bundles into long cardboard trays, packed back to front. On any given day she'd deliver anywhere from fifteen to twenty boxes of mail.

Iva called from behind the cage, "Got anything interesting this morning?"

"Same ol' same ol'," Cee said.

Iva and CeeCee went way back. Even though they were

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three years apart in age, they'd become friends at Morning Shade High School. CeeCee got married shortly after a brief college effort, but Iva had continued her education, never marrying, and though Cee wasn't in the habit of speculation, she thought Iva was too set in her ways to answer to any man at this stage in her life. At thirty-something, Iva had a good job—ran the town's small brick post office and took care of her invalid mother evenings and weekends. She told Cee that she was happy, but Cee wondered how anybody could be happy working and taking care of an ailing mother.

Sighing, she eyed a letter with illegible writing, thankful that her own mother was healthy—though she couldn't imagine how her dad could have been so irresponsible and not taken out life insurance. Money had always been an issue in the Diamond household, and CeeCee guessed that Dad had thought with Mom's writing income she'd never have a financial worry. But she'd watched new lines form around her mother's eyes—millstone lines, Grandma called them. And CeeCee feared that she'd put a few there herself lately.

"I hope we don't have an early winter," Iva mused, her gaze focused on the fall display outside the front window. "I dread the thought of snow and ice."

CeeCee nodded. "Me too. Especially if I have to drive on the stuff."

"You won't have any trouble. Those postal vehicles are built to go."

CeeCee was glad she didn't walk the route. "I still like summer—heat and all."

"Maybe we'll luck out this year and have a mild winter." Iva glanced up and smiled as a customer entered the building.

CeeCee stacked the last of her route and numbered the trays.

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A few minutes later she put the trays into the parcel carts and wheeled the day's work out to her Long Life Vehicle.

There wasn't a sign of winter on this late October morning. Overhead an azure sky blanketed the sleepy town of Morning Shade; a warm, acrid-scented breeze carried the smell of drying leaves. Another fifteen minutes and she'd loaded the cardboard trays three to four across the back of her vehicle and as high as needed. By ten o'clock the day's mail was off and rolling.

Pulling out of the parking lot, CeeCee took a deep breath and realized that for the first time since Jake's death, she felt fairly human, and she'd have to say the feeling was welcome. Family and friends said that in time she'd be as good as new. She doubted that inflated optimism the moment she'd heard it. Sure, her marriage had stunk. Jake had stunk, and he hadn't been husband material, but nothing smelled as bad or lasted as long as death.

She leaned over and popped a book on tape into the CD player. By eleven o'clock she was humming along, sipping on a sixty-four-ounce Diet Pepsi in a plastic cup that she'd bought at the Citgo. A sack of salt-and-vinegar potato chips rested on the seat beside her.

She had a good job. In a few months she could get her own place and get out of Mom's hair. Not that her mother ever let on that she was a burden, but Cee knew. She just knew.

Straight ahead she spotted the Barneses' Norwegian elk-hound, and she felt that funny curl in the pit of her stomach. That dog gave her fits. There he was, standing sentinel at the mailbox, waiting to tear into the bumper of her LLV. There were three dogs on her route that she'd just as soon were on somebody else's—the Barneses' Norwegian elkhound and the Fergusons' two German shepherds.

Those dogs were rocket fueled. Even if she worked up to

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a fairly decent speed—enough to slam-dunk mail in the box and floor the truck before the animals noticed—those shepherds nailed her every time. The elkhound’s record was nearly as good.

Neither rain nor snow nor . . . er . . . something, she told herself as she approached the Barneses’ mailbox, would impede her from delivering the mail. She felt superior this morning. All Mrs. Barnes had today was a flyer and a Famous Barr sales catalog. She figured she could throw those in the box and be past the twenty-inch-high, fifty-pound pest before he could catch her. Mashing down on the gas pedal, she made a run for it.

The hound’s eyes focused on the speeding vehicle. He sat up straighter, jowls dripping with saliva, senses zeroed in on the approaching bumper. CeeCee reached the box doing around thirty—way too fast she knew but figuring that if she wasn’t smart enough to outwit a dog she’d best get a different occupation.

The hound sprang at the split second CeeCee’s hand snaked out, jerked the box open then shut. Teeth clamped around the hard rubber bumper and the LLV shook.

CeeCee threw her head back and laughed, pressing harder on the gas pedal. No way could he hold on. They had this battle every morning.

The mail truck approached the Millses’ mailbox fairly flying, truck shaking like a GE juicer—the pest was really annoying now. The postal truck picked up speed with the hound still hanging on. The race was neck and neck. Man against beast.

CeeCee spotted Hubert Mills coming out of the house and thought, *Okay. Now what?* She shot a quick glance at the mail tray and to her relief saw nothing for the Mills address. She blew by like a sonic blast, leaving Mr. Mills reeling at the edge of the road, scratching his head, staring after the truck like it was an alien spaceship.

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Sneaking a peek in the rearview mirror, she decided that she should have said something—hollered something. Mail trucks are not supposed to shoot by postal patrons, particularly not with hounds hanging off their front bumpers.

But, hey, it's the hound's fault, she reasoned.

Settling back, she reached for her Diet Pepsi and tore into the bag of chips.

The hound gave up before she reached the crossroad. He let go of the bumper and dropped to his belly in the middle of the road, tongue lagging. CeeCee glanced in her rearview mirror and shouted, "Yes!"

The hound was gathering strength for a new day.

Well, she thought. I'll be here tomorrow and the next day and the next. CeeCee Tamaris is back in town!

* * *

"Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home . . ."

"Huh?" Stella Diamond sat straight up, fumbling for her glasses. "Is it time, Lord?"

"Swing low, sweet chariot . . ."

It took a second for her aging eyes to adjust to the blaring television screen. Arnold Schwarzenegger was gone; now some man dressed in a tuxedo stood on a podium singing an old gospel hymn.

Relief flooded Stella. Land sakes. She'd thought for sure it was *time*.

Hitting the remote control's Mute button, she detangled herself from the afghan and closed her eyes, disappointment replacing relief. Maude's office door was closed; she'd have to be quiet and not disturb her daughter-in-law. She sniffed the air, assuring herself the roast was cooking properly.

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She sat back in the recliner and put her head in her hands.

If she died right now it would be so peaceful. No pain—just a quick getaway. And that’s what she was looking for at her age. Hassle-free death; the only way to go.

Lord, this is Stella. It was always nice to remind Him who needed His time. *I’m eighty-seven and useless as snow tires in the Bahamas. I get under everybody’s feet, and it’s downright impossible to stay out of the way twenty-four hours a day.*

The phone rang. *Doesn’t anyone ever leave a body alone?*

She stuffed her upper plate into her mouth and leaned over and picked up the cordless receiver. After a couple of attempts she found the Talk button and pushed it.

Hilda Throckmorton’s grating voice came across the line. “Stella?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad I caught you at home.”

“Yeah.” Like she had anywhere important to go. After morning coffee at Citgo with Pansy, Frances, and Simon she’d pretty well shot her day’s agenda. Except for bridge a couple nights a week and Farkle on Friday nights.

“You’re aware the church’s annual spaghetti supper is coming up?”

“Again?” Hadn’t they just been through that brouhaha? The older you got the quicker time passed; for Stella it seemed like she was on a fast freight to Beulah Land.

Hilda *tsked* and Stella pictured the stout woman perched at her desk, doling out work like a baker rolls out dough.

“Time *does* get away from us, doesn’t it? The girls and I have been thinking, Stella. You’d be absolutely *ideal* to chair the committee this year.”

Translated to mean: *Congratulations. You’re the elected chump.*

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When had “the girls,” meaning the women of Hilda’s Guild committee, come up with this? Seems like she’d already taken her turn chairing the event two years ago—and once was enough. Granted, funds from the spaghetti function played a large part in the church’s yearly budget, but the whole pasta-and-garlic-bread thing gave Stella a headache.

How to get out of it?

The old excuse machine was rusty; she hadn’t seen the attack coming and she should have. Stella prided herself on details—always alert for the unexpected, the vaguely-implicit-but-never-voiced sort of thing.

“What do I have to do?” It didn’t really matter; she didn’t want to do it. She’d learned a long time ago that women could be vicious. Couldn’t make ’em happy if you gave them the moon with their name written in gold on it, and the females of Living Truth Community Church could be downright aggravating when it came to working arrangements.

“Oh, very little,” Hilda chirped. “As chair you can *delegate* practically everything.”

Right, Stella thought. She was too old to swallow that one. What Hilda was saying was if Stella could hog-tie one more stressed-out soccer, basketball-practice, ballet-practice, aerobic, yoga overworked mom who still had five minutes left in her day to volunteer for another committee, she had it made. But she was up to the challenge.

The gig would be a piece of cake. She glanced at Maude’s closed office door. Plus it would get her out of the house.

Stella felt sorry for her daughter-in-law. Herb had been a negligent numskull. She’d raised him smarter than he’d proved to be. When they’d found him dead in a hotel room last year, who’d have ever thought he’d have been so irresponsible? Hadn’t

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left poor Maude a lick of life insurance or 401(k). Maude got by the best she could, but Stella knew the upcoming holidays and extra expenses were weighing heavily on her mind. Stella sure wasn't in any position to help out financially—had to leave Shady Acres and move in with Maude because her daughter-in-law didn't have the funds to keep her in the residential home, and she sure didn't have the funds to stay there.

You can't stretch a \$253-a-month pension the way you used to.

Some folks had the erroneous notion that a writer made a lot of money. Well, maybe some did, but Stella didn't think Maude was one of them.

Stella would give her eyeteeth to be back at the residential care center with Simon, Pansy, and Frances. Not that she minded living with Maude—and now CeeCee, since she'd moved back home—but a body craves privacy. If she wanted to take her teeth out, scratch in unbecoming places, and sit around in her Hanes all day, she ought to be able to do it; she was eighty-seven years old. Stella Diamond had earned the right to be a slob in private. She'd even earned the right to say no to these committee chairs, but seeing how she had nothing better to do with her time she supposed it wouldn't kill her to help out.

"Do I get to pick my own committee?" she asked.

"Well . . . yes. I have a few who have already volunteered—"

Stella cut Hilda off at the pass. She'd been through that, and no thanks. She'd assemble her own workers and make sure they showed up when they promised. Too often she'd been left holding the bag at the last minute; a whole basement full of hungry people and about as much organization as a dogfight. "I'll choose my own workers, thank you."

"Well . . . you are the chair," Hilda conceded.

And don't you forget it, Stella thought. But she would. Hilda

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was as touchy as a new blister, and Stella knew she was taking on a big headache by accepting the chair. She took the job anyway.

“When’s the first meeting?”

A hint of coolness crept into Hilda’s tone. “Since you’re chair I suppose that’s up to you.”

Well, now—that was okay. Maybe for once Hilda would stand back and let somebody else give the orders.

“Okay,” Stella said, feeling a little power happy. “We’ll meet next Wednesday morning. I’ll have my workers lined up and raring to go.”

“Well do you mind if *I’m* on the committee?”

Hilda sounded a *little* on edge now. Stella couldn’t remember a year when the busybody wasn’t on the committee, and as much as she’d like to remind Hilda that others were capable of cooking spaghetti, Stella wasn’t mean-spirited—most days. Besides, if Hilda wasn’t on the planning committee she’d take over the decorating committee. *Best give her a job where I can boss her—like beverages. Ice and foam cups. She can’t do much harm there.*

Chuckling, Stella wondered why she was feeling so wicked. Guess it didn’t matter; as long as she felt anything it meant she was still sucking in air.

She punched the Off button a few minutes later, realizing that she was chairman of the annual church spaghetti supper. What a hoot.

Yawning, she took out her teeth again, picked up a true-crime paperback, and leaned back to pass another hour. Days could get long when you were her age—that’s eighty-seven breathing down the neck of eighty-eight. Hard to believe she’d made it this far.