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Comes Now the



Fiction by Don James

I WAS A LITTLE YOUNG to be sitting in the family conference, but my mother decided I should because I was 16 and, as she said, "You're old enough to understand a few of a woman's problems."

My uncle Cary Higgins, her older brother, looked annoyed when he saw me. He is a successful attorney and prefers to do most of the family thinking and deciding. So there was no need for a 16-year-old to be present at the conference that was to decide what to do about Grandfather Higgins.

There were Uncle Cary and his wife, Aunt Ethel; Uncle Thomas, the automobile dealer, and his wife, Aunt Isabel; my mother and my father, Howard Daniel McIntyre.

I guess we had the smallest and the fewest and the least of everything. As a clerk in City Hall, my father never made much money, and we lived in an old house, drove an old car, and—compared with Uncle Cary and Uncle Thomas—we simply didn't have it.

My mother, whose name is Cynthia, had more determination than either of her two brothers, though, and everyone knew it. Personally, I thought the most important person there was Grandfather Higgins, but I wasn't sure some of the others did. He sat by me on the couch in Uncle Cary's big living room, his cane propped against one knee; he was smoking his battered old pipe and the simply terrible-smelling tobacco he always bought.

I guess he felt that he was a little important, too, because Grandpa made a try. A really big college try. He puffed his pipe into a big cloud of smoke and said, "I don't see what all the fuss is about. Why can't I just stay on at the little house?"

Uncle Cary put on his patient smile. "Because it's no longer practical, Dad,"

he said. "After all, you are 84 now." "So? I'm an old man. I still manage."

Uncle Thomas said, "Since you fell and broke your hip we can't take chances, Dad. What if it happened again? We'd all be in trouble then."

"I paid the bills," Grandpa said. "I had those bonds."

"But they're gone now," Uncle Thomas said. "We can't take chances."

Uncle Cary nodded and said, "That's the point. It's best if you live with others. That's why we decided upon the Peaceful View Home. You'll like it there."

"I will?" said Grandpa. "Certainly. And I wish you'd get it out of your head that it's a nursing home. It isn't. There are only a few bedridden patients there."

"I'm certain you'll like it," Aunt Ethel said. "It's so comfortable. And you can share a room with someone near your own age. You'll like that."

"It'll cost a lot," Grandpa said.

"We can get about \$10,000 for the old house," Uncle Cary said. "I've already looked into it. That will help handle the costs, and of course we can help. Tom and I, that is." He didn't look at Mom and Dad, but we knew what he meant: we were the poorer relatives.

Dad said, "We could help a little." He was scowling. I looked at Mom and she was sitting there with a small smile, watching Uncle Cary.

Grandpa said, "I've lived in that house 50 years. I don't want to move. I'm not sick. Why should I go to that old folks' hospital?"

"It's not a hospital," Uncle Cary said. "I wish you'd get that straight. And it's sensible. You used your extra bond money for hospital bills, and it isn't practical for us to keep up the house for you."

Aunt Isabel added: "Besides, Dad,

you don't cook good meals for yourself. It's better for you to move. We'd all feel easier about you."

"Putting me on the shelf," Grandpa muttered.

Uncle Cary frowned. "That's not true. We're taking the best possible care of you. You should see that, Dad. You've always had a good head for plain, common sense."

GRANDPA PUFFED at his pipe and looked at Uncle Cary, his pale blue eyes almost without expression. "I guess you know what's best for me, Cary," he said quietly. "You won't have to keep stopping in to check up on me then, either. I'll be less worry to you all."

Uncle Cary frowned some more. "Frankly, you will be less worry. We'll know that you're all right all the time." Grandpa nodded. "I don't have much choice, I guess."

Uncle Thomas said, "It's just that . . . well, we think it's time we sort of took over for you. Maybe we can think those things out better than you can. We're your kids and we want to do the right things for you. We think this is the right thing."

"Sell the furniture, too? Your mother was pretty proud of it."

"Well, except for a few pieces, perhaps," Uncle Cary said, and looked at my aunt. "Ethel would like that commode . . . the old one. It's a fair antique piece. That is, of course, if no one else . . ." He looked around at the others, his forehead wrinkled.

Aunt Isabel said, "I could probably find a place for the bedroom set. We never did get around to really fixing up our fifth bedroom."

Grandpa looked almost frightened. "I won't fall again," he offered. "I won't break a hip. I can be careful."



Plaintiff



Grandpa was the defendant. His crime was growing old, and he had no defenders; none, that is, until Mom spoke up . . .

"No, Dad," Uncle Cary said firmly. "It's decided. We know what's best."

"Comes now the plaintiff," Mom said. It was the first time she had spoken and she looked directly at Uncle Cary.

"What do you mean by that, Cynthia?" he said.

"Isn't that what you lawyers say when you're enumerating your complaints and reasons why someone is guilty. Aren't you the plaintiff?"

"Cynthia, your ideas about law have always been exceedingly vague. I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Now, Cynthia," Grandpa said. "Let the boys decide . . ."

"What do you really want to do, Dad?" she said.

"I want to stay where I am, but I guess it isn't practical. I might fall again or something. And I guess I don't get myself good meals. And I suppose I do worry you. It's just that I don't want to go to that old folks' hospital."

"Rest home," Uncle Cary corrected him impatiently. "But that settles it, Cynthia. Dad is in agreement."

UNCLE THOMAS smiled and rubbed his hands together and got up as if he had just settled a big deal. "And that's that!" he said. "Cary, you see about selling the house. That's your line. Let me know if I can help you. Isabel and I have to run. We're due at a party."

Uncle Cary nodded and got up, too. "Fine. I'll pick you up in the morning, Tom. We'll go out to the rest home and make arrangements. Dad, you'd better start throwing away a lot of that junk you've got around and get ready to move. I imagine Cynthia can help you."

"All right, son," Grandpa said. His voice sounded older than ever, and he was staring at his pipe, which had gone out. "If that's the way it is."

Mom glanced at Dad and they exchanged

one of their little nods. "Dad's not going to a rest home," she said.

"Cynthia!" warned Uncle Cary. "Let's not get into anything. It's decided!"

"Dad's coming to live with us," Mom said. Then she looked away from them and walked over to Grandpa and put out a hand and patted his cheek. "That is, Dad, if you will. We want you with us because you're ours and we love you."

Grandpa's eyes filled with tears and he tried to smile. "Now, Cynthia . . . there's no need to . . ."

Uncle Cary said quickly: "That's not practical. We couldn't—that is, there may be times when you can't—" He stopped speaking and you could see that they were all scared that they might have to take Grandpa once in a while, too.

Mom smiled and said, "Comes now the plaintiff again?"

"Now look here, Cynthia!" Uncle Cary was getting peeved and his face was flushed.

"Oh, Dad's guilty!" Mom said. "Indeed he is. But I don't think he should be put away for his crime. I think he's still acceptable to society—at least, in the McIntyre household."

"Crime? What are you trying to insinuate?" Uncle Cary spluttered.

"The crime of growing old, I guess," Mom said. "If you live long enough, you'll be guilty some day, too. We all will."

She took Grandpa's hand and said, "Come on, Dad. We'll drive you home."

My Dad grinned as he came over and helped Grandpa to his feet and we all started for the front door. Nobody said anything, and I felt terribly proud. I knew just how Grandpa felt about going to the nursing home because that's what it was.

At the door I suddenly realized that I hadn't said anything at all. So I turned around and said it—and Uncle Cary has been sort of cool to me ever since.

"Uncle Cary," I said. "Goes now the defendant. Case dismissed!"

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