

## An Exhausting Number of Blessings

By Diane Alimena

“Mildred! My shirt!”

Everard Bone sounded grieved as he called for his wife Mildred.

“Why whatever is wrong, Everard?” Mildred calmly asked as she came up the stairs. She had been in the kitchen making breakfast for their two sons before they headed out for school.

“I’ve put my elbow through the sleeve,” said Everard.

“Oh dear, why so you have,” stated Mildred. “Better here at home than when you were out somewhere,” Mildred said sensibly as she examined the shirt. “It is really quite worn so it is only good for rags. With a rip like that I wouldn’t donate it for the jumble sale. I’ll take the buttons off and cut it up. There are half a dozen other clean shirts in your drawer. Shall I look through them today? You may need to buy more.”

“It would be very inconvenient to have to go shopping. Perhaps you can just go on my behalf when you know how many I might need,” Everard replied.

“Yes, of course I can. Though it might not be today. I need to take a few things to the church for the jumble sale. You don’t mind if I donate a few birds?” Mildred asked. When Everard’s mother had died they inherited the house complete with dozens of stuffed birds. “As Sister Blatt says, ‘they go like hotcakes.’”

“As far as I am concerned you may take them all. I have never liked them,” Everard generously offered.

“Well the boys might each want to keep a favorite. I’ll let them choose and see how many I can manage to carry,” Mildred decided.

Heading back downstairs she heard their sons arguing about cricket matches.

“Mummy!” cried her younger son Thomas. “Jeremy says you’re going to go to his cricket match next week and bring a cake. What about my match? Don’t you want to see me play?” Thomas had the same grieved quality in his voice as his father had had.

“Not a sponge cake, Mother,” Jeremy stated. “Those never come out very well. But you do make a fine walnut cake. Sorry Thomas, but I asked her first.” Jeremy did not sound very sorry.

“Oh dear,” said Mildred. “I’ll have to check the calendar again. I just can’t think at the moment. Oh, and both of you may choose one bird to keep but the rest are going to the jumble sale.”

“The owl!” both boys yelled in unison.

“Oh dear,” said Mildred again. “Alright, we’ll keep the owl and whoo whoo whoo gets it will be decided later,” she said jokingly, trying to avoid another conflict.

“Oh, and please Mummy I will need some new paints. I need to make a papier-mâché dinosaur for science class. I need lots of brown and green. Can you get those for me today? Please?” pleaded Thomas.

“Oh dear,” said Mildred again. “Another item on the list. Now off you go boys. Hurry or you’ll miss the bus.”

Everard came down, suitably clothed, gave Mildred a good-bye kiss and headed out the door. He suddenly

turned back. “The index ... I need the index by next Tuesday. You’ll have it done by then, won’t you Mildred?”

“Oh dear,” said Mildred. “I suppose it is possible.” But the door was shut and Mildred was finally in a quiet house.

She put on the kettle and spoke to herself in a gentle voice. “Now Mildred, a cup of tea, strong with plenty of sugar and milk. Just the thing to face the beginning of a long day.” She took her calendar and began to add her new tasks in the appropriate day and made a separate list of things which simply must be accomplished in the day at hand. She smiled to herself and thought, “I have a life full of blessings, an exhausting number of blessings. I wonder how I could manage a day or two off.”

Mildred looked through Everard’s wardrobe evaluating the condition of each shirt. Two more were worn but still good enough for jumble. She sorted through the clothes Thomas had outgrown and added some trousers and sweaters to the pile. It was a joy to remove a dozen birds, some savage and some sad, from the drawing room and dining room. As she placed them in boxes she decided that Everard would have to drive her to the church on Saturday morning. She could take the clothing with her on the bus. Sister Blatt was expecting her to help with sorting of donations at 10am. Then Mildred could snatch a quick lunch and stop and buy some new shirts for Everard. Finally she would pick up some paints for Thomas.

As she caught the bus into the city center she found a window seat and drifted into a mental game of how to plot to get a day or two away. There would have to be a reason to travel, a noble reason, something that Everard and the boys could not object to or see as anything enjoyable. Yes, that was it, another duty, but what? and to whom? A sick relative? No, they would know her relatives or rather her lack of relatives who could call on her for aid. A friend? No, Dora Caldicott was too hale and hearty and known. She could go visit Dora, but really, sometimes that was not a bit relaxing. Dora was just a different person to whom she would have to accommodate herself. Someone from her past? Yes. That was it. A godmother, an ancient lady from her childhood parish. She would get a letter from the vicar saying that Miss, now what name could she give her... Doggett, Miss Doggett was very poorly and would like to see her one last time.

Mildred laughed to herself. This deceit was coming too easily. Now where should she go? Not too far or too near. Oxford seemed about right but they might want to come along and see the city. No, it would have to be a bit out of the way with just an offer of overnight accommodation at the vicarage. Perhaps... Crampton Hodnet. That sounded like a likely place. A long bus ride from Oxford city center. She would have to write a letter to herself from the Vicar of Crampton Hodnet requesting an urgent visit to Miss Doggett. And the real plan would be Oxford itself with a room at the Randolph paid for in

cash of course: no check to trace. Just two days of wandering and doing whatever she felt like. It would be heavenly!

As she got off the bus and walked to the parish hall, Mildred was struck by the thought that this could be a reality. It was a good plan and one which she could carry out. "Am I really so desperate and deceitful?" She asked herself and did not receive a ready answer. It was tempting.

The piles of clothes were daunting but Sister Blatt and Winifred Mallory, both really elderly now, sorted with the ease of those whose years of experience made child's play of the task. They chatted and asked about Mildred's "boys." Their small talk and gossip were comforting to Mildred. "Why would I need an escape from this cozy world of good works?" she thought to herself. Then Sister Blatt said, "Remember Mildred, you are going to bring a cake Saturday afternoon for the baked goods table. Not a sponge, but you do make a good walnut cake."

"Oh dear, I had forgotten," admitted Mildred. "Yes, of course, a walnut cake."

She suddenly realized she would have to buy some new stationary, something different, so no one would recognize it when the letter from the Vicar of Crampton Hodnet came.

Mildred was glad that her errand to buy shirts gave her an excuse to turn down Winifred's invitation to lunch. She hurried off walking a few blocks to a small ladies tea room. But, as she approached the entrance she felt the need to act a bit out of character and be a bit self-indulgent. "I will treat myself to a really good lunch and perhaps a glass of sherry," she thought.

So Mildred entered a larger, rather posh restaurant. She chose a small table in an alcove, slightly hidden away. When the waiter came she ordered the salmon and dill potatoes and a glass of sherry, an amontillado, to enjoy as an aperitif.

Sipping the amber liquid, Mildred became aware that she could overhear the conversation at an adjoining table.

"But, Leonora. I didn't know you had a sister! You've never mentioned her."

"Oh yes, I have a sister. I just don't really ever see her. It is so much easier to have a life unencumbered by relatives." Leonora replied in a rather unpleasant voice. Then Mildred saw Leonora signal the waiter and held up her glass to him. "Another martini, please"

"But Leonora. She asked to come and visit and you lied to her? You told her you would be away a few days?"

"Oh yes. Sometimes lying is the only way to deal with family."

"But Leonora. What is she like? Your sister?"

"Very like my mother." Leonora paused as she ate the last olive from her empty glass. "I never really liked my mother."

Mildred's cheeks flushed. Was it the sherry or the realization that she did not want to become a person who

resorted to lying to family. And Mildred's best quality came to her rescue. She smiled and almost laughed aloud. Her gift of seeing the funny side to life put everything into perspective. She would be a bit less accommodating. She would just tell Everard and the boys that she might just need an afternoon or a day to quietly relax.

That evening at dinner Everard seemed unusually animated. He took his knife and tapped on his water glass. "I have some news. I am sorry I probably should have discussed it with you first, Mildred, but I feel quite strongly so I am just letting you all know together. This summer I will need to travel to East Africa and spend about three weeks scoping out some new locations for fieldwork. Now I have decided that you boys are old enough to come along. It will be a useful way for you to spend part of your summer holidays. You will see Kenya and start to get a feel for my work. You won't be able to know if you'd like to follow in my footsteps without seeing the field."

Jeremy and Thomas were stunned into silence.

"Now Mildred you, of course, need no invitation to come along. However, most of these locations, though not actually dangerous, are rather primitive. The boys and I will be fine roughing it a bit, but I would very much understand if you preferred to stay home. Or will you be too lonely?"

"Oh dear! This is a surprise," said Mildred. "I think it will be a wonderful experience for the boys. But, you're right Everard. I don't think I would enjoy primitive living. I will just have to manage by myself for a few weeks."

Everard seemed a bit apologetic. It was unusual for him to be so solicitous. "Are you sure you will be alright? Perhaps your friend Dora could come for those weeks. I hate to think of you alone."

Mildred was surprised at the sense of dread that filled her. The thought of three weeks in Dora's company was exhausting. She coolly replied. "That is very thoughtful, Everard. But I am sure I can cope. Besides, I think Dora mentioned something about having to go this summer and stay with an elderly friend in Crampton Hodnet."