Beautiful Are the Feet: Part One

by Ginnah Howard

Naomi hadn't expected them to come in such a big box. When the UPS man tried to hand it to her, she told him there must be some mistake, but then he pointed to her name¾NAOMI BROWN¾right there on the top. When she finally got off all that tape, she had another surprise: a box full of pellets that popped out all over her carpet when she dug around trying to find the real package. Which turned out not to even be a package, but a plastic bag way down at the bottom. It's a wonder she found it at all.

"Stop that. Scat," she told Muffin who was already busy batting all that white stuff back under her couch where she'd never get to it. But of course Muffin just kept right on. "Judgment Day's coming," she told Muffin's yellow rear that was just skooching under the cover.

Naomi held the little bag up to the light. At least they looked like they had sounded on the radio, flat and creamy white, delicate, pretty much like the ones Reverend Bukes placed on her tongue on Sundays. And fastened to the plastic, a nice little card with a lamb in the corner and in the middle the words: Bless you. And beneath that Oral Roberts' signature. He had nice handwriting: legible, but not so neat that it didn't look trustworthy. Well, at least the wafers and the card were what she expected, but the box and all the rest seemed a little excessive.

Naomi put the wafers in one of the clean cottage cheese containers she kept with her jars. The Lord would direct her in their use when the time was right. Then she prayed for her neighbor, the woman upstairs. Dear Jesus, show me the way to help Lilla, to save her from her sin. Amen.

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Sometimes Naomi watched Lilla. With the living room shadowed, with her dark green shades halfway down, she stood behind her lace curtains, her thin hands wrapped in her apron, and watched Lilla load and unload her car. She listened to her steps running up and down the stairs with her groceries and her laundry, the many things Lilla carried in and out, and she prayed for guidance. Lilla's red fuzzy coat, the one she said she got at the Salvation Army, was always unbuttoned. Her long brown hair, here and there gray, was always blowing about. No hat. No gloves. Lilla looks tired, Lord. Help her to find the way to righteousness. Amen.

"Don't move the curtain, Muffin," Naomi said when the cat jumped up on the chair to take a look.

On Fridays on her way out, Lilla rang Naomi's bell. "I'm going to John's," Lilla always said when Naomi appeared at the door. "I won't be back until Monday after school. Would you mind sticking my paper inside the screen so it doesn't blow all over?"

Naomi always said she'd be glad to. Then she would step back, open her door all the way and invite Lilla in.

Lilla always looked toward her car and then she smiled and said, "Well, just for a minute."

They usually began by comparing the current state of their African violets.

When Naomi first met Lilla she'd read her each plant's name written in perfect Palmer script on the side of each green pot: Mountain Melody, Rosa Rain, Jolene... She said Jolene was a Mother's Day gift from her son and his wife. She said that though it was a pretty color, it was not a name she would have chosen herself.

Lilla said she never realized violets even had names, but that Jolene sounded Southern.

Naomi said it just sounded sinful to her.

"Oh," Lilla said, "Well, couldn't you change it?"

Naomi told her she thought that might offend Louise. Louise, that was her son's wife.

Naomi kept her violets on a tea table by her front window. They had blossomed the whole month of March, a small blanket of dark green velvet, jeweled with white and purple and pink. They lit up the neat little living room, its stuffed chairs covered with dark chenille bedspreads, their arms protected by clean beige washcloths, her worn black leather Bible on the footstool next to her rocker.

"Well, they certainly are beautiful," Lilla always observed. Adding an update on the decline of her own violets upstairs: increased yellowing and withering of the leaves, how they hadn't bloomed since she moved.

To Naomi's suggestions about feeding from the top and making sure they were behind filtered light, Lilla always said, "All I did was water them at home and they did fine."

Then Lilla would perch on the edge of one of the dark chairs, and Naomi would ask how Lilla's sons were doing.

Once Lilla had told her, "They paid the rent on time again." And she'd laughed. Lilla was renting her house to her two sons. One dropped out of some strange sounding school; the other had just returned from selling dyed shirts to people who followed a band around the country. At least that was what Naomi thought Lilla said. She told Naomi, "When they moved back home, I couldn't ask them to leave, but I didn't want to live with them. And I didn't want to not have a place of my own, so I found this apartment."

Naomi said she'd never seen the apartment upstairs, though she imagined it must be about the same as hers.

"Oh, it's a wonderful place, full of sun."

Naomi said maybe that was why Lilla's violets weren't doing well.

When she first met Lilla, Naomi asked about her husband.

"My husband is dead," Lilla'd told her.

Naomi told her how sorry she was. Then she asked how he died.

"He committed suicide," Lilla replied.

She'd just came right out and said it.

Naomi told her how sorry she was to have asked.

But Lilla said, "It happened a long time ago."

Naomi waited, but Lilla hadn't said anymore.

Naomi told Lilla she left her husband in 1953. Just packed up her seven year old son and left. For reasons she didn't want to talk about. *Woe unto them that rise up early that they may follow strong drink.*

Then Naomi asked Lilla if she didn't think of getting married again.

"Married? No, I never think of getting married again." She told Naomi she lived with someone on weekends when he came home from his job in the city. "That's enough for me," she'd said and then Lilla laughed. Lilla laughed a lot.

When Naomi asked her if she wasn't concerned with the sin, Lilla had stopped laughing and looked closely at Naomi. She said, "I didn't like being married."

When Naomi reached for her *Bible* to show Lilla the proof, Lilla had stood up and smiled. "I respect your views," she said, "and I hope you'll respect mine." Then she went out to her car, put her basket of laundry on the front seat, and drove away.

Jesus, help Lilla to see the path she's on, Naomi prayed.

Strange looking people came to see Lilla. Two tall thin men or boys, it was hard for Naomi to tell which, with long hair and dark clothes, not very nice clothes, not very clean clothes, and two girls. Pretty girls wearing long flowered skirts, but funny shoes. They stood crowded together and laughing on the porch while one of them rang Lilla's bell. Naomi wasn't sure, but it looked like one of the girls, the one with blond hair, had something in the side of her nose. A gold ring.

They must have taken off their shoes because Naomi could hardly hear their feet once they went upstairs. Through the heat duct she could feel the vibrations of their voices and laughter. Maybe even singing. Then a man came in a car marked *Italian Kitchen*. It was too late when they left for Naomi to see anything,

but the next day there were dozens of smoked Marlboro cigarettes and two pizza boxes in the trash.

"Those were my sons and their girlfriends," Lilla told Naomi. "They came to bring the rent. They split it four ways."

Naomi asked if Lilla meant that the girls lived in her house, too.

"Yes," Lilla said, "yes, they do."

Be thou ashamed, O Zidon: for the sea hath spoken, saying, I travail not, neither do I nourish up young men, nor bring up virgins.

One Saturday Naomi opened her front door to her daughter-in-law's big face.

"I don't see why you lock up during the day, Mother Brown. I begin to worry something's happened to you."

That's what Louise always said. No matter how fast Naomi got to the door, there was no stopping her from saying that every time.

"Nothing's happened to me, Louise. You know it takes a minute to get out of my chair and turn the knob."

If she had to come all the way from the kitchen or if Heaven forbid she was in the bathroom, she never heard the end of it. Then Louise would say she was sure she'd had a stroke. Raymond didn't say much of anything. Usually he gave her a nod, a Hello, Mom, and then he started leafing through the automotive section of the Pennysaver. Raymond was a whiz of a mechanic. He always had been.

Louise thrust a large green plant at her. So close she couldn't register what it was.

"Your Easter lily," Louise said. "Isn't it a beauty. I'll just give it a little drink." And before Naomi could intervene, Louise took herself right back to the kitchen. Then she hollered all the way through the apartment, "It's a wonder you don't trip over that spooky cat of yours and break a leg, Mother Brown, you keep this place so dark."

No chance that Muffin would cross Louise's path. Naomi knew where she was. Hiding under the bed. Muffin did not like Louise; she talked too loud.

"Raymond," Naomi said.

Raymond looked up from his paper.

"Thank you for the plant."

Naomi moved some of her violets to get the Easter lily in the right light. Every few days she turned it and checked to make sure the soil was moist. She removed the yellow anthers to avoid staining the petals.

She told Muffin, "Don't chew the edges."

She told Lilla drainage was very important. And a cool environment at night.

"They look like white trumpets," Lilla said, when she peered into the faces of the flowers. "How thoughtful of your son and daughter-in-law to bring it to you."

Naomi said yes, they always got her a lily at Easter and a poinsettia at Christmas and an African violet on Mother's Day. Then she sat down slowly in her chair and rolled her hands in her sweater.

"But what I want," she said, "are grandchildren."

"Oh," Lilla said and sat down on the couch.

Muffin jumped into Naomi's lap and stretched her neck up to be petted. Naomi scratched her under her soft yellow ears. Muffin's purr filled the silence.

Once Naomi had shown Louise Raymond's highchair, one of the few things she had brought with them when she'd left Raymond's father. If he ever married again, she did not want that other woman's children to use it. All these years she'd kept it stored in the apartment basement. She swept the stairs and cleaned away the cobwebs. She polished the chair with lemon wax. Then she took Louise down to see it. She told Louise how Raymond used to point to the little ducks and say, Quick quack. Louise asked why she didn't give it to someone before it warped.

"Are they not able to have children?" Lilla asked.

"Louise doesn't want them."
"That's hard for you."
"Yes," she said, "it is."

On Good Friday Naomi received an answer to her prayers: God advised her what to do. A little while after she heard the toilet flush and the bathtub drain, she called up Lilla. She told her it would mean a lot to her if she might be willing to stop down to share a little communion.

There was a long pause, but then Lilla said, "Well, I guess I feel all right about doing that, but I won't stay too long. John's hoping to get out of the city early."

Naomi placed the white plastic carton on the back of the coffee table. She opened her *Bible* to I Corinthians 6.9 and saved it with her blue velvet Living Water bookmark. She put the closed *Bible* on the end table right next to where she'd be sitting. And Lilla could sit right about there. She poured a little grape juice from the Sunny Square can into two small jelly glasses and set them on either side of the carton on top of two paper napkins.

Maybe a candle would be good. But she decided against that and took the grape juice can back to the refrigerator. It wasn't blessed like the wafers, but she was sure that was all right.

"Get down," she told Muffin.

The cat dropped from the counter with a thud and followed Naomi back into the dim living room. Every penny of electricity saved made her Social Security check go a little further.

Naomi looked at herself in the hall mirror. Her hair was getting so thin. She didn't know why either. She'd never done those awful things to it.

She surveyed the couch and the table from the front door. Why don't you sit right there, she would say. Then she would open up the container and shake a wafer onto each of their napkins. That way she wouldn't be touching them. Would you mind if I pray for you? she would say.

Naomi opened her door before Lilla rang.

"It's so wonderful to have the whole week off. No students; no papers," Lilla said as she came in. She didn't even have her coat on. It was piled up on top of her laundry on the edge of the porch.

"Won't you sit right there on that side of the couch," Naomi directed.

Lilla glanced at the table, then at the window. "Your lily is still flourishing," she said.

Muffin brushed against Lilla's legs and jumped up on the couch, waving her bushy yellow tail back and forth over the glasses.

"Off," Naomi said.

The cat stretched out, right where Naomi planned to sit, and turned over on her back, exposing her generous belly to be scratched. Naomi went carefully around the table, lifted Muffin up, and set her down firmly on the floor.

"I miss having animals." Lilla sighed and sat down on the edge of the couch. "Our dog Sam went off during hunting season and never came home. I told my sons to give him a call every hour so he wouldn't range too far. But." Lilla sighed again. "I knew that without me there that would probably happen."

Lilla settled back into the couch and folded her hands in her lap.

Naomi sat down. Close enough to reach over to touch her. That would be important when she prayed.

"I thought I'd read a passage from the *Bible* first." She opened to the blue marker.

Lilla shifted away a little. "You know I couldn't have done this a few years ago."

Naomi put her finger on the verse she wanted to read.

Lilla eyed the glasses. "I wouldn't have felt comfortable. But then I started reading Joseph Campbell."

"These are Oral Roberts wafers," Naomi said.

"Oh, Campbell isn't an evangelist," Lilla said. Then she laughed. "Though in a way he is. But he's not a Christian."

"Not a Christian?" Naomi returned the cottage cheese container to the table and ran her moist fingers back and forth on her skirt.

"My son says I'm a Campbell groupie."

"What?" Naomi said.

"Joseph Campbell is a teacher. He's interested in mythology. I saw him interviewed on PBS last year. That's when I started going to church again. I hadn't been since high school. I cried during the whole service. I'd forgotten: the music, the windows, the little children. At the end everybody joined hands. I didn't have any tissues; I had to wipe my nose on my sleeve. I always take Kleenex with me now."

"What church does he belong to?" Naomi asked. She again opened her *Bible.*

"Well, really, it would be better to think of him as a teacher," Lilla said. She glanced at the clock. "It's fine if you want to start now."

Naomi adjusted her glasses and leaned a little toward the sunlight. She tipped the scripture down a little. "'Know you not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God. Be not deceived: neither fornicators...'" Naomi felt Lilla's weight shift, but she did not stop...."'nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves shall inherit the kingdom of God.' And now, if you don't mind I'd like to say a prayer for you." Naomi reached over and placed her hand on Lilla's knee, but she did not look at her face. "God, help this woman. Guide her to do what is right and remove her from sin. In Jesus name. Amen." Naomi reached for the plastic container.

"Oh, I couldn't do that now," Lilla said as she stood up.

Naomi looked at her. Two bright red spots burned on Lilla's cheeks.