

Beautiful Are the Feet: Part Two

by Ginnah Howard

Naomi saw an ad in one of those slick circulars that came in her mail. *Wigs by Paula. One size fits all. \$39.95. Easy to wash and care for. Return if not completely satisfied.* She prayed about it. *And it shall come to pass...instead of well set hair, baldness.* She ordered #21 Pearl White. Her own hair was yellow-gray, but she saw no reason why the wig she got had to be that color. She wrote a check, made out the order, sealed it in an envelope, put her galoshes on over her shoes, and walked down to mail it at the corner before she received any more messages.

Naomi heard Lilla's storm door open and close. She listened for her steps. Slow and heavy. Something was wrong.

Lilla no longer stopped on Fridays. She must have canceled her paper. The few times they did meet, sometimes when Naomi was coming back from her once a week trip to the store, Lilla said hello, and that was all. Lilla only gave her polite looks, nothing real. *Not all accepted the good news.*

Lilla set something heavy down right above Naomi's head.

Naomi reached out and pulled a shriveled white blossom off the lily. Soon it would be time to lay it on its side in a dark place.

"Stop clawing," Naomi said.

Then she heard a strange sound upstairs. She stood still and listened hard. Muffin purred. "Shhh," she whispered. Then she heard it again. Crying. She was sure that's what it was: the sound of a woman crying.

Woe unto them that put darkness for light and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.

Naomi moved in to her dining room and placed her ear against the wall where the hot air duct ran up to Lilla's apartment. Yes, Lilla was crying: low moaning, shuddering sobs. Then she heard her walk heavily into the bathroom and the water running. It was Friday. Lilla usually left for that man's place long before this.

Naomi went to the phone. Maybe she should call, say, Lilla, I don't mean to intrude, but are you all right? Can I do anything?

Many days and years shall ye be troubled, ye careless women: for the vintage shall fail, the gathering shall not come.

Jesus help me. What should I do? Amen.

Naomi woke in the dark.

She'd been trying to run and she couldn't. A child screamed. It was only a dream. Someone was ringing Lilla's bell. The clock said 11. She tried to raise up, but she couldn't. Then she heard Lilla coming down the stairs. She lay still, listening: the door, a man's voice, a woman's voice^{3/4}Lilla's, the door closing, feet going up the stairs, a man's steps.

And then it was very quiet. The man John? Had he come in the night to hurt Lilla, to make her cry some more? God must be punishing Lilla.

Naomi felt as though her legs were paralyzed. She tried to struggle up. There was no feeling in her lower body. She reached down and touched...fur.

"Muffin, get off."

A strange sound began to swell in the ceiling: a rhythmic pulsing, becoming more regular, faster, faster^{3/4}the beating of a giant heart. Naomi lifted the sides of her pillow and pressed them hard against her head.

Out of the serpent's root shall come forth a cockatrice and his fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent.

Naomi woke early. She listened. She heard a voice telling her what to do: Speak to Lilla and the man. May they not burn in hell, Lord. Then all was quiet. Only Muffin snoring on the pillow

beside her. She slowly pushed up in the bed and moved her stiff legs over the side. Every morning it was hard to believe these were her legs. She had had nice legs. Nice thin ankles. She pulled her gown over the legs she had now. She wiggled her stiff ankles and searched for her slippers with her toes. She knew what she was going to do.

In the half-light of morning she put on her best dress. After she washed her face and brushed her teeth, she took her wig from the upside down bowl where she kept it in the bathroom cupboard. She slipped it on and tucked a few wisps of her own hair up under the little stretchy band. She looked at herself in the mirror and pushed and puffed the soft-as-silk curls. Pearl white. Why it looked quite nice. She smiled. She pulled on the pink sweater Louise and Raymond had given her for her seventieth birthday. She put on her Sunday shoes. *How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.* She took a few peanut butter crackers and went into the hall. She opened her front door. Soft spring air at last; winter had hung on so long this year. She looked out. Beside Lilla's red car, parked so close it almost touched, like it might drive right up the back of Lilla's trunk, was a big blue truck with giant tires. She locked her screen door.

Naomi went into the living room. She pushed the rocker up to where she could see out on the porch. She planned to have the door open before Lilla got down the steps. Lilla, I...When the time came, she would be told what to say, what to do.

What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the Lord?

Muffin jumped up on her lap, circled twice, and looked at her.

"How do you like my new hairdo?" Naomi asked.

Muffin sniffed at the crackers.

Naomi waited. The mist lifted. The sun came out. She heard sounds upstairs. The street started to stir. Her paper hit the porch with a thud.

That's it: She could be going out to get her paper.

Muffin walked back and forth between the dim living room and the kitchen, whining for her breakfast.

"All right, all right," Naomi whispered.

She struggled out of her chair, stiff from sitting so long. She walked back through the dim house, cradling Muffin in her arms. Muffin wiggled to be free. Naomi set her beside her dish. She turned on the light over the stove and blinked at the sight of her neat little kitchen: the green shades all halfway down, the waxed fruit on the breakfast table, the plaque that said, *Go forth to them that are in darkness*. God please don't punish Lilla.

Naomi took down a box of Tender Vittles. Just then she heard them on the stairs, their voices, the screech of Lilla's screen door. With the Tender Vittles still in her hand, Naomi started through the house as fast as she could go. For a second she was startled by a strange woman in her hall. Then she recognized herself in the mirror.

She unlocked the door and stepped out on the porch. She'd reach for the paper and she'd say... Muffin streaked between her legs and jumped over the edge. Naomi started to call, but then she saw them. She stopped, halfway in and halfway out, the paper rolled perfectly at her feet, the cat food packet caught in the crook of her arm.

They stood at the end of the walk. They did not see her. The man was looking into Lilla's face. He reached out his hand and placed it on Lilla's cheek. She pressed his hand against her face and then she tilted back her head and laughed. Laughed a laugh that filled the street.

The man got into his blue truck, backed up, pulled around Lilla's car and drove away. Lilla stood watching until the truck turned the corner. Then she stooped and picked up a box at her feet and set it on top of the trash barrel at the curb. Lilla got into her car. She reached over to roll down her window and as she did, she saw Naomi. She smiled and waved. Naomi waved back. She stood on the end of the porch until Lilla's car disappeared.

She waited a few more minutes. Then she went down the steps and headed toward the trash bin. Muffin followed, her raised tail a golden flag. Naomi looked up and down the street. Then she lifted the lid of the box. "Oh, you poor things, you poor things," she said.

Once she had them out of the box and lined up on her kitchen counter, she began to breathe regularly again. First she gently pulled away all of the limp yellow leaves and the rest of the dead growth. She tipped a pitcher containing just the right amount of RapidGro so that just the right amount of pale green water flowed into each pot. She raised the dark shades a few inches. There was still hope.

Muffin sat on the counter surveying the pots. "Purr around these," Naomi said. "They are in need." God have mercy on Lilla, and God, help me to save these poor little ones. Amen.

