

LAST MEAL

MN WIGGINS

The old woman checked her oven. “Almost ready.” She shuffled into the dining room and placed a china plate on the tablecloth. The wooden box creaked as she opened it. She withdrew a silver knife and fork, arranging them carefully on the table. Making it back into the kitchen, she placed a hand on her back as she bent down to retrieve the butter and jam from the icebox. Journeying again to the dining room, she placed these in the proper position on the table. She returned to pull the coffee off the stovetop burner, fill her blue and white porcelain cup, and ferry it by its saucer to the dining room. “I can smell those biscuits now. Isn’t it lovely? When I woke up to that smell as a little girl, I couldn’t wait to get out of bed.”

She paused to catch her breath along her well-worn path before opening the oven door. Her bifocals fogged as she withdrew the baking sheet. “Now, I don’t mean to be telling tales out of school, but these may be the best I’ve ever made.” The woman scooped the first biscuit with a spatula, her weapon of choice. A clasp of thunder sounded outside, and she nearly dumped the fresh baked goodness during its transfer to a white serving plate. The woman peered out the kitchen window and called out, “I haven’t seen clouds that dark since the day Donnie passed. Did I tell you that story? We were just kids playing in the creek out behind the house. He slipped and hit his head. By the time I fetched Momma, he was drowned. She beat me, oh did she beat me for being in that creek and for Donnie. I was only five, but I’ll feel that tanning until the day I die.” The old woman smiled, scooped the other two biscuits, and arranged them on the serving dish.

She turned off the oven, ambled into the dining room, and placed the serving dish sporting three thick, homemade biscuits. Surveying the table, she smiled again and shuffled over to the china cabinet. She pulled a pistol from the drawer and placed it to the right of her dinner fork. Pulling back her embroidered chair, she sat and carefully placed a cloth napkin in her lap. “Are you sure you won’t have anything, Preacher?”

The man shook his head.

She stabbed the first biscuit with her fork. “I made three and can’t eat more than one. It’s a shame to let the others go to waste. It’s Momma’s recipe. She may have been a lot of things, but she knew how to cook.” Getting no reply,

the old woman shrugged. "Suit yourself." She sliced the biscuit in half and watched the steam rise. Skidding her knife across the container, she watched the butter curl. "I miss the sticks of butter you used to buy. My grandmother used to churn butter as a little girl. That was a time. I remember her old privy out behind her house. I was scared to death to pee because of spiders."

Thunder roared again. "Sure is dark out there," she said, reaching for jam. "Now, I'm not trying to put on airs, Preacher, but this is the finest raspberry jam in the county. It's a shame you won't have any. I usually buy whatever's on sale, but today's special. Of course, there was a time when I had the finest of everything." She mixed jam into the butter on the top half of her biscuit in a swirl. Leaning over her plate, she took a bite and closed her eyes. "My whole life, I've eaten the top half first. My grandmother believed that said something about a body. Top halfers were go-getters, she'd say, always seeing what could be. Bottom halfers just accepted things as they were, never trying for more than they had." The old woman snickered. "A lot of folks used to say my grandmother was nuts." She sipped her coffee. "Sure you won't have some? Aren't you worried you'll hurt my feelings?"

The man shook his head.

"Well, Heavens be, what kind of preacher are you?"

The old woman finished the top half and prepared the bottom. She took a bite and said, "I have a confession. My last name isn't Westfield. It never was. I changed it to protect my boys, but they're dead now. One drank himself to death, and the other smoked until cancer took him. Never had any grandchildren. My oldest married a harlot who got pregnant by another man. She and that man died not long after. They say God works in mysterious ways, but he was clear on that one. Her cheating turned my boy to drinking, but I forgave the Jezebel long ago."

She took another bite. "Truth be told, I can't cast stones. Once upon a time, I fancied a young doctor, even though I was married. When he came calling, I buttered his biscuit. Gave me my firstborn. I never admitted that to anyone. I suppose it doesn't matter now. Feels good to unburden myself." She glanced toward the window. "The storm's passed. Might turn out to be a nice afternoon."

She reached for another. "I feel embarrassed to go for seconds with you not having any. Why don't you eat this other one? It'd make me feel better."

The man shook his head.

She sliced the biscuit open as precisely as the first, applied butter and jam in a measured fashion, and bit the top half. “My last name used to be Narsustankowski.” The old woman watched his eyes sharply, but the man’s expression didn’t change. Her eyes narrowed. “I suspect you’ve heard the name.”

The man nodded.

She bit her lower lip and took a breath. “Then you know all about my husband, Robert.”

He nodded.

“And what he did.”

The man nodded a third time.

Her hand trembled as she took another bite. “I’d ask if you plan to tell anyone, but I’m the last of my line, so I don’t care.” She pointed at him. “Tell whomever you’d like, but set the record straight if you do. Some say I was the brains behind it, some sort of Madame Bovary. Nothing was further from the truth.”

The man raised an eyebrow.

Her countenance fell. “Fine. Truth is, he would never have amounted to anything if it weren’t for me, stuck in a lab somewhere, working on piddly things. When he discovered that drug— yes, I pushed him. I told him that all the testing he wanted to do was a waste of time. And I may have questioned his manhood and ridiculed him into falsifying results to get it to market. But, Preacher, there was no way I could have known how many would die. Oh, but the money was sweet. Mercy alive, I had to have it.” Her head dipped. “And when they came for Robert, I abandoned him. Took the boys, the only thing he ever loved.” She looked away. “I knew where he was hiding when he got sick. I didn’t lift a finger—just let him die alone. Preacher, I’m sorry for what I’ve done.”

She covered her eyes. “Goodness, the sun’s come alive out there.” She sipped her coffee and took a bite of the bottom of her second biscuit. “I’m glad you dropped by on today of all days. Being new in town, I’m still unsure how you knew to visit. Are you sure we haven’t met? I can’t shake how much it feels I know you.”

The man sat motionlessly.

“You sure don’t say much for a preacher.” She finished the biscuit and reached for the last one. She sliced it and brought the bottom half to her mouth. After her bite, she said, “I don’t know why I did that. Maybe I’m feeling a little more satisfied today.” She stood, worked her way over to the window, and closed the curtains. “Have you ever known the sun to shine so brightly?” She returned to the table, finished the bottom half, and then the top. The woman tidied her mouth with her napkin. “I can’t believe I ate all three. But I tell you what, this was the best meal I can remember.”

She patted the revolver. “It’s time.” She examined his eyes. “I suspect some will judge me for this—say I took the coward’s way. When they learn who I was, some’ll say good riddance. But Preacher, you tell them I’ve had a hard life, did the best I could, and this was my choice. I stopped taking the pills a few weeks ago, and there’s nothing more the doctors can do for me. I know what’s coming and don’t particularly care to stick around for it. She shook her finger. “And don’t try to talk me out of it. I don’t want any Bible thumping about fire and brimstone.”

The man stared back blankly.

She looked at him with bewildered eyes. “Aren’t you going to try to stop me?”

He shook his head.

“Well, I declare. What kind of preacher are you?”

He shook his head again.

The old woman’s eyes widened. “You’re not the new preacher?” She rose and pointed the gun at him. “Then get the hell out of my house!” She used both hands to cock the trigger.

The figure rose and turned to the wall behind him. A door appeared. The old woman shielded her eyes from the light as he opened it. The figure extended a hand toward her. She turned and saw herself sitting in the chair, hand clutched to her chest. She put down the pistol and passed on. A white serving plate with two untouched biscuits watched her leave.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MN Wiggins is an internationally published author, surgeon, voice actor, and humorist from the American South. Formerly an Associate Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Arkansas, he currently works for the Department of Veteran Affairs training residents from the University of Florida. His recently released novel, *Physician's Guide to Homicide*, completes the Arkansas Traveler trilogy, featuring Wiggins's most well-known character, Dr. Melvin Napier.

In addition to *AcademFic*, Dr. Wiggins's short stories have been featured in *The Horror Zine*, *The Hooghly Review*, *Black Petals*, *Medicine and Meaning*, and read on the podcasts *Creepy* and *Frightening Tales*. He has forthcoming stories in *Symphonies of Imagination*, *Close to the Bone*, *Flunk* magazine, *Pawsitively Creepy*, *Once Upon a Crocodile*, *Thirteen*, and *The Night's End* podcast. Dr. Wiggins's complete works may be found at www.MNWiggins.com