
THE GOOD SOUTHERNER

James William Gardner

There seemed to be some misunderstanding. Lynwood Ramsey always wore his wingtips to the office. Why didn't this woman understand that? She was darting around the room, chatting to herself, disturbing him and not making a bit of sense. "I must have my shoes," he said once again more forcefully than before.

"First things first, Lynwood," said the woman. She was smiling at him, but apparently not understanding a word he was saying to her. She looked vaguely familiar like he'd seen her before somewhere. Perhaps she had come into the office at one time or another. She might have even been a client. There were so many he couldn't keep track of them all. The important thing now was his shoes. How could he make her see that? "Lynwood Honey, sit up now. Aunt Julia has fixed you a nice breakfast. Eggs over easy just the way you like."

She came over and started tugging on him, pulling his arm and fussing. What on earth was she going on about? "I need to get ready," he said. "I need to go home." That wasn't right. He was going to work. Not to the house. Someone had better call Dianne and let her know he was going to the office first. "Can we give Dianne a call and let her know?" he said to the woman.

"Certainly we can. Where are you going today?"

"Home," he answered. He had to try and get home.

"Here, raise up and let me get these pillows fixed so you can eat."

"You don't seem to hear me, Ma'am. I have a big day today."

"I'm sure you do, but first let's see if you can't eat a little something. Julia's got eggs and grits and those little link sausages you're so fond of." She placed a tray of food in front of him and then pulled a chair up to the side of the bed and sat down. "Here Lynwood, have a bite of these nice eggs. Open your mouth."

Whatever it was tasted good. He thought that he might have time for just a few bites anyway. "Remember, Lynwood, breakfast is the most important meal of the day." That's what his mother used to tell him. Lord, he needed to get home and see her too. What was it that he needed to do? Well, the first thing was to get dressed. He couldn't go out in these.

"Ma'am, could you let Dianne know that I need my shoes, my good shoes?"

"Now, here's a bite of sausage," said the woman. "Chew it good before you swallow it now. That's it."

Just then another woman appeared from somewhere. "Is he eating?" she said.

The first woman nodded. "He's doing right well this morning."

"That's good. Yesterday he hardly ate a bite. Well, I take that back. He did eat most of his pie at supper."

"Dianne, is that you, Honey?" said Lynwood Ramsey. The sun was so bright that he couldn't half see who it was.

"No it ain't Dianne, Lynwood Darling. You know it ain't Dianne. It's Jennifer."

"I need to tell Dianne something."

"What is it?" asked the first woman. "What do you need to say to Dianne?"

He couldn't remember. How was he supposed to remember anything with all of this confusion? He'd just call her from the office. She'd be home.

"Honey, Dianne ain't here. She's gone to be with Jesus. You know that."

He remembered. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. He knew that well enough.

“Now, one more bite of egg and we’ll be done. You ate very well this morning. Aunt Julia will be tickled. Look Jennifer, Lynwood cleaned his plate.”

“Can you tell Dianne that I need to see her a minute?” he said. “We need to go home now.”

“Here, don’t try and get up yet. Let me get this tray off of you. Don’t Lynwood. Hold still a minute. Jennifer, don’t just stand there. Come and help me.”

“Lynwood, listen to us.”

“We have to go.”

“Where? Where do you have to go in such a hurry?”

“We have to get down to the office.”

“I bet he needs to go to the bathroom. Come on, Lynwood. Let’s us go to the toilet. Then we can go down to the office. Is today court day? Here, hold on to my arm. That’s right. We’ll wash up and then get you dressed. Dorothy, hold on to his other arm. He’s kind of wobbly this morning.”

If only he could remember. Where was Dianne? He walked between the two women into the bathroom. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. The words seemed to come from out of nowhere.

“There we are. Now you sit down there and do your business and then we’ll get you cleaned up and dressed. Lord, it’s after nine. Hurry up, Lynwood. Holler when you’re done.” Both of the women walked out of the little room, but he could hear them talking right outside of the door.

“Have you finished?” said one of them.

“I think he’s probably done.” They opened the door and came back in. “Here, let’s clean you off good.”

“Cleanliness is next to godliness,” he said.

“That’s right. You remember that don’t you? That’s what Momma always used to say, isn’t it? Ain’t it funny how he can remember certain things? You don’t never know what he’s going to come up with.”

“Let’s wash off your face and hands and get that sleep out of your

eyes. After all, you want to look presentable. He was always so meticulous about his appearance.”

“Oh mercy, yes,” said Dorothy Hypes. “He got that from Momma too. We all did. I remember when Lynwood used to wear that nice powder blue suit. You remember that? He was mighty good looking. Momma said he used to strut. I can hear her now. She’d say he strutted around like a turkey rooster in the courtroom.”

“He was always a proud man.”

“Yes. Well, he had every reason to be. He was the best attorney in Tazewell County. Here, close your eyes, Lynwood, so we don’t get soap in them. That’s right. Now, let me comb your hair and we’ll be done.”

“Can one of you ladies tell me something?”

“What?”

He tried to recall where he was going. It was home. That’s where he wanted to be. “How can I get back home?” he said.

“Lynwood Honey, you are home. This is your home. You live here with me and Jennifer and Aunt Julia.”

“He don’t understand. He’s thinking about home with Momma and Daddy. It’s strange how they can remember things that happened years ago, but not anything about yesterday. The poor thing don’t have a clue where he is or even who we are.”

“Oh, I think he knows. He might not be able to call our names, but he knows that we love him, I think.”

“Come on over here, Lynwood, and let’s get you dressed. Jennifer, reach in that drawer and get me some underwear. Here, let’s us get these pajama bottoms off first.”

“Is it court day, today?” he asked her.

“I don’t know. Is it?”

“It might be.”

“Well, we’ll need to get you dressed up nice then. Do you have a big case?”

“Yes” he said.

“What is it?”

“I need to be getting on home. Do y’all know if Diane is back?”

“Honey, Diane ain’t coming back. She’s with the Lord in heaven. You remember.”

“I go and prepare a place for you,” he said.

“That’s right, Lynwood. That’s what Jesus said ain’t it?”

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.”

“There, now which pair of trousers would you like? How about these khakis with the cuffs? You like these don’t you? Raise your foot up. That’s right.”

Then the other woman pulled a white shirt out of the closet. “Remember how he loved a white shirt. He used to say that there wasn’t nothing like a nice starched white shirt. Here, Honey. Don’t that look nice on you.”

“You look mighty handsome this morning, Lynwood.”

“That’s nice. Clothes make the man,” he said.

“You know Bobby Ingram said something about dropping by today. You remember Bobby don’t you? He’s your friend from church. Bobby Ingram?”

“Yes.”

“He don’t know who Bobby is.”

“Well, he’ll still be happy to see him. Dorothy, can you button his shirt? I’ll get his suspenders. Where are they?”

“Hanging on the back of the door, I think.”

“Here they are.”

“Now, sit down here and let’s get your socks and shoes on. Which pair would you like? You want your brown oxfords or your black wingtips?”

“Wingtips,” he said.