

FICTION

THE TEXT

• PART 2 •

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THEM



Rain fell like tears on Elaine's windshield as she parked on the street near the coffee shop. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to still the roiling inside. Her stomach felt like she was on the merry-go-round in the third grade.

The fifth grade boys laughed and ran as fast as they could to spin the occupants and make them sick. She just wanted to get off the ride.

by CHRIS FABRY

NOW, SHE FELT THE SAME. She wished she had never texted her mother and suggested they meet for coffee.

Her mother, Dawn, had tried to mask the hurt in her response, but Elaine could feel it, could sense her mother's pain even through her words, "Yes! How about Saturday? Pick the time, and I'll be there."

Elaine glanced at the dashboard clock: 12:05. Her mother was probably inside now, seething. She could feel the shame almost a block away.

She looked under the seat for her umbrella but couldn't find it. She grabbed her purse and hurried into the rain.

Her mother waved at her from a corner table and smiled. She was cradling a black mug and put it down as she stood. Elaine walked resolutely to the table and sat without a hug.

"What can I get you?" Dawn said. "It's on me."

"I don't want anything, Mom."

"They have pumpkin spice."

Elaine felt it throughout her body. The tension. "Mom, please. This is hard enough. Don't try to control what I drink or don't drink."

Elaine could feel the hurt from her mother even if she didn't look into her eyes. She was in pain, and Elaine was sure her mom would put that pain on her.

"Look, I told you I need to talk. So let's just get to it."

Elaine looked up and saw her mother's face was soft. She looked older, with wrinkles Elaine didn't recall. Lines in her forehead and crow's feet around her eyes that made her mother look like some wise, older woman.

"Well, I'm all ears," Dawn said. "And no matter what you have to say, I just want you to know how happy I am to see you."

Elaine looked down at her phone and pulled up the list she had made. Things she knew she wanted to communicate but was afraid she'd forget. She couldn't read the text because the

phone was jiggling, so she put it on the table and folded her hands in her lap.

"I don't want you sending the kids presents. Especially the coloring books and Bible stories. I think it's best if you just don't send anything."

A long pause. "OK. If that's what you want."

Elaine could feel the hurt from her mother even if she didn't look into her eyes.

Elaine stared at the phone. That was not the reaction she was prepared to hear. She thought her mother would protest and moan about the way she was being treated. Instead, there was acquiescence. Almost a submissive spirit.

In the lull, Dawn said, "Can I ask about Amanda and Kenny? How are they doing?"

"They're fine, Mom. Let's not get off track."

"Let me clarify something, then, if it's OK," Dawn said without emotion. "Would a birthday card and a gift of money be all right? Or would that be inappropriate?"

There was a hint of something when she said the word *inappropriate*, and Elaine looked up, but all she could see was the scowling face of her husband in her mind. His reaction to the Bible stories and the way Kenny and Amanda asked about their grandmother constantly vexed him. Behind closed doors he had said, "I don't want her proselytizing our kids. If she wants to believe in fairy tales, that's her business. But I won't have her trying to convert our children."

The distance Elaine had asked for was more about keeping peace with her husband than keeping her mother away. But she didn't want to blame any of this on him and cause even more

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problems. That was a relational something she was trying to navigate, but the home waters had become more turbulent lately.

"I think it's best to just not send anything at this point," Elaine said.

"OK. I understand."

Elaine pushed her phone aside. "Do you?"

Dawn took a sip of her latte. "Well, what I mean is, I understand what you're asking of me. I don't understand why. I wish I did. But I'm OK with not understanding right now."

Elaine narrowed her eyes. "What are you trying to pull?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why aren't you yelling? Or crying? That's what I remember as a kid; you would cry about things and get your tissues out by the handful, and it made me feel so bad. When you cried, I always felt like it was my fault."

Dawn sighed and reached a hand across the table, but Elaine withdrew hers quickly.

"Honey, I'm sorry. There are so many things coming back to me that I said or did when you and Larry were younger. I could write a book about the mistakes I made. It would be longer than *War and Peace*. I wish I could go back and do it all over again."

Elaine bit her lip and studied the age spots on her mother's hands. "Have you talked with Larry about me? About the distance between us?"

Dawn sat back, and her shoulders slumped. "Yes. We had a conversation. You know Larry; it was short. He talks like he's double-parked."

Elaine felt the old tension and grit her teeth. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "What did he say?"

"Basically, that you didn't want to hurt me, but you needed space and some time. And I asked how long it would take. And I guess I did a little crying on the phone and moaned and whined a little too. And he said the two of us would need to work it out."

Elaine felt a smile coming, and she stifled it. She had reluctantly talked with her brother about her decision and had asked him to not try to talk her out of it or communicate anything to their mother. It sounded like he had mostly kept his word.

"I also asked him to tell me what I did wrong and why you would treat me like this. And he said that would need to come from you, and he said I should wait until you're ready. So here I am."

Elaine stared at the table. There weren't many people in the coffee shop, and she wondered how they kept it open. She thought of the cost of taxes and payroll and rent and the rising inflation of the coffee bean. This is where her mind went when she didn't want to deal with life. Numbers were a safe place. Other people's problems and bills and debts were easier to think about than her own.

"What else is on your phone there?" Dawn said. "I can take it. I'm a big girl."

"You won't cry and grab tissues?"

"I can't promise that, but I do promise to wait until I get back to my car."

Elaine stared at the list on her phone. She clicked a button, and it went blank. She glanced at the window as water cascaded so hard it splattered loudly on the pavement and roof.

"I've missed you, Mom. And at the same time, I feel better with this distance. I can't explain it. And Larry's right, I don't want to make your life harder. It's just where I am."

Elaine saw a tear in her mother's eyes, and a switch flipped inside. She was ready to get up and run into the downpour. But her mother's voice stopped her.

"I've missed you too. But if this is best for you right now, take the time you need. I'll be here. I love you."

Elaine put her phone in her purse and grabbed her keys and stood. Her mother stood as well, and it felt like she expected a hug. But Elaine could only nod and hurry outside and into the rain. ☔

Read Part 1 in July 2025 *Mature Living* or visit lifeway.com/matureliving. Part 3 will appear in the December 2025 issue.

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