

I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

In Eudora Welty's story "The Key" we meet Ellie Morgan who *was a large woman with a face as pink and crowded as an old fashioned rose. She must have been about forty years old.* She and her husband Albert had driven into Yellow Leaf, Mississippi and were waiting at the train station with their suitcases – anticipating a trip all the way to Niagara Falls, possibly to experience romance for the first time. When they had married years ago, since they were both deaf mutes limited to sign language, the match had perhaps more to do with the convenience of communication than love.

The station waiting room contained two rows of isolated people who sat in silence, . . . uncomfortably, expectantly. There was also a red-haired young man present leaning against the wall, tossing a key from one hand to the other. *The color of his hair seemed to jump and move, like the flicker of a match struck in a wind.* Then for a moment *one hand stayed passive in the air, then, seized too late, the key fell to the floor . . . making a fierce metallic sound like a challenge, a sound of seriousness.*

Everyone heard it except Ellie and Albert – but it did slide across the floor to rest at Albert's feet. Albert picked it up. That this key should come within his vision and grasp! Unexpected. Meaningful? He turned to his wife. *The young man waited – watched. "I found it,"* said Albert to his wife. *"It means something. From now on we will get along better, have more understanding . . . Maybe when we reach Niagara Falls we will even fall in love . . ."* He laughed silently. His wife replied, *"You are always talking nonsense. Be quiet."* But she was secretly pleased. Albert explained, *"You must see it as a symbol . . . of something that we deserve, and that is happiness. We will find happiness in Niagara Falls.*

Amid all this they missed their train – didn't hear it arrive. Now all they could do was look at Ellie's postcard of the Falls. *"To work for so many years, and then to miss the train,"* she said. Looking at the picture, Albert had heard that if you leaned up right against the rail overlooking the Falls *" . . . you can hear Niagara Falls"* *"How do you hear it?"* begged Ellie. *"You hear it with your whole self. You listen with your arms and your legs and your whole body. You'll never forget what hearing is, after that."*

The red-haired young man observed all of this. He did not wait to see any more, but went out into the night – leaving the couple with an alternate key to the Star Hotel, Room 2 – their journey's end? *Outside in the dark he reached for a cigarette. As he held the match close he gazed straight ahead, and in his eyes, all at once wild and searching, there was certainly, besides the simple compassion in his regard, a look both restless and weary . . .* He seemed distressed by the uselessness of the thing he had done. And all the while Niagara Falls cascades relentlessly – amazing, inexhaustible like God's grace – if we'd only let it sweep us away.

Today's Gospel speaks of keys to the kingdom of heaven – offered not only to Simon Peter in some kind of ecclesiastical sense – but to you and me as well. Let's not miss the train.

