



Till Heaven Then Forever

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DEDICATION



To you, Lonnie Williams, our dear friend, and in honor of your beloved, Janice; how can we ever repay the unconditional love of a friend such as you? You are an amazing man. I can only suspect that Janice is looking at you with a smile. May God continue to bless you. Thank you.

PROLOGUE

There are those who would say that I am selfish and weak. They are correct. There are those who would say that my soul will be eternally damned. That you see remains the sticking point. For days I have prayed that God would forgive me for what I am seriously contemplating. So serious am I that I have collected every bottle of pain and sleeping medications from our home. I have even thrown in a few bottles of pain meds from our dog, Napoleon. Now, I am very calm. It is not a spontaneous action that I am about to commit. No. it is well thought out. I've been thinking about it for at least two months. It is all that I can think about. My time of late has been spent on my knees by her bed.

“Please, dear God, I don’t want to be damned as some here on earth proclaim.” Yet, I can’t go forward until I am sure that he will not condemn me. In the darkest pocket of my heart, I find solace when I think of what I am about to do. Not chaos, not any fear, no dread, just peace at the thought of the outcome.

“You promised, Heavenly Father, that you would never allow us to be tempted beyond our control if we depend

on you. My life since meeting her has been in your control. I gladly turned over my will to you when I witnessed the joy which she possessed. When she spoke of you, the peace and light which were emitted from her convinced me that you are real. Together, we read our Bible each morning, and we would begin our day in prayer. Always, we would ask guidance from you and that you would direct each step.”

“Never did I miss the bars and chaos that shrouded my life before her. She introduced me to you—the joy and peace that only you can provide. Now I ask you for that same peace, which I have always known from you.”

“Dear Father, if I were about to do wrong, I believe that you would fill my heart with distress. Instead, there is only peace that the pain might soon be at an end. Let the world proclaim that I committed grievous error. You are the only one whose judgment of me matters. So here I am humbly asking that you will bring me home with you. Please tell her that I am about to enter your world. To you, I come without fear. It is only leaving here, this present world, which causes disdain. What if I do not take enough? To be left here, without her, in a vegetative state, would be worse than death. So I pray that you will help me in this last act. I look forward to seeing you and all those who have gone before, Amen.”

Now my conscience is clear. I look at all the various shaped bottles— about twenty in all with different levels of the pain and sleeping concoctions. The glass of water is filled to the top so that once I begin, there is no going back. I am ready, but one last time I want to think over my life since she became a part of it. If there is any reason for me to remain here, I know that my god will show it to me as I reflect over a long and happy life. What more joy could anyone know?

This is not a religious dissertation. My story is not unique. It is our story of love and devotion. Every married couple has their story. Ours is not special—an older man who had given up on finding love and a younger woman who had suffered more than she could bear but had continued fighting for a good life for herself and her son. The story of many, yet I feel that it needs to be told. For when all is said and done, Lord, it is a story of redemption. It is the tale of two people who had become enmeshed in the lies of this world. Those subtle lies which so many fall into without even knowing it until suddenly, they have left you and are attempting to do things their way. Their life is a mess, and they wonder why. Yes, this is about the fallen of the world, those who want to change but wonder if they can. Finally, this is a tale of love for God. If you believe him, you learn that you certainly can change, and he will

still bless you. He takes the mess and sews those loose ends like a beautiful quilt.

So if you are at the end of your life, and you think that you have blown it, listen to my heartfelt plea to understand that with God, it is never too late. Sure, when I read the scripture and the promises of my god, it is difficult not to consider how my life might be different now, at the end. What if I had remained faithful to the truth? Would I have accomplished greatness? Maybe, yet I've been happy. Just maybe when I stand soon before the God of the Universe, who is a kind god but is also just—he has to be just — perhaps God will tell me what a good job I did on earth. When I turn to face my reward, will I cry tears of joy for all those whose lives I've touched, including strangers? That is my hope. You decide if this is worth passing on. This is a tribute to my love, Lily, but even more to my god. If you know him, you understand.

LILY



April 3, 1990, for a brief moment, my heart actually stopped. This sudden feeling surprised me as much as it could anyone. You see, always considering myself to be strong, tough, and not easily swayed, I had never experienced such a strong emotion. Let me explain.

I left home to join the merchant marines when I was sixteen. That was what young men everywhere were doing. I quit school because I admired the men returning from World War II. Their stories of bravery and daring were an inspiration. Adventure! I longed to experience greatness. At around the age of sixteen, I boarded a Liberty ship named the Felix Grundy in Newport News, Virginia. That lovely vessel was bound for Danzig, Poland. When we boarded, there were already seven hundred ninety-nine varieties of horses waiting for us. My “brave adventure” was to feed and water a section of those horses. By the time we reached Danzig, we only had about seven hundred surviving horses that were happier than us to finally disembark that stinking ship. All the accumulated manure from the journey across the pond had never been removed. The horses were standing in such a deep pile of waste that they were tilted head down in the stalls. Fortunately, when the time came to return home, the grateful Polish workers had cleaned every inch of the ship. I will never forget the difference. It had been scrubbed and smelled refreshingly clean. The smiles of the Polish people and the gratitude they demonstrated toward the Americans as we fulfilled our promise to rebuild Poland in the Marshall Plan was indeed touching.

I was not special, but I was tough. Throughout my life, I never whined or complained. Doing what was necessary

was normal to me. I just did what needed to be done. But when I met her at the age of sixty-four, my heart did melt. It was very apparent to me that I would never be the same, so there was an overwhelming feeling that I could not do anything to, in any way, jeopardize this relationship. Women had come and gone from my life since my separation from my only wife many years before. I had remained separated, not divorced, because that gave me the ability to explain to some love-starved woman that I really could not marry again.

“It is all financial, you see. I would lose all my assets if I marry you. We would have to start over without a cent. I wish that I had not structured it as such, but that is the way that it has to be. I would be penniless, but if that will make you happy, so be it.” The next morning, a call over our tragic parting would come, interspersed with sobs and tears.

“I love you with all my heart, Brian, but I can’t do this to you—make you lose all that you have worked for all your life. I have decided to return to my old boyfriend, Rob, Harry, Glenn, etc.” Or she may explain, “My job has become so difficult that...” I would smile in relief and once again wipe the perspiration from my forehead as though I was saved from a terrible ordeal. In the past, phone calls professing love would escalate to demands for justice. Callers who would hang up whenever I answered

would disturb me throughout the night and that might continue for weeks. It was all so predictable—until her.

Frequently, we would have brief encounters at the local hardware store on a Sunday afternoon. She would run inside to pick up something after her time at church. She would look so beautiful as I stood there looking like a frog in my shorts on just another Sunday.

“Brian, you really should consider going to church. It just makes the day right.” She would smile and rush past with her household purchases. For several moments, I stood there watching her like a cow in the pasture waiting to be fed. Then I would return to my day of making deals and more money. Life had been empty and futile for so long. I did have two grown sons, but they had their own lives. No one really depended on me or even needed me.

About fifteen years before, I had purchased a condo in the Abaco, Bahamas. There, I found solace sailing and walking on the beach most days. Away from the deals and business bartering, I spent my time reflecting. I also read profusely while sitting on the beach. I found that I was surrounded with great friends who knew when to give me space. I felt alive when I returned to my island.

Everything about that island was pleasing to me. I had become an intricate part of island living. Now I dreamed of showing her life at a slower pace. I had recently built a

beautiful home for her. Believe me, I know how pathetic this may sound, but in my heart, I knew. I knew that she would change my life. Once we finally got to spend time together, she would know that what I felt for her was real. When I looked into her eyes, I saw my soul mate for life, even if our time together was sporadic and sparse at the beginning. I hoped, however, that once we came together, it would last forever, and we would find joy. That was what I saw as I looked into her eyes. I had no idea of the depth of joy that I was about to know. Not just the joy from Lily but the joy that my eventual relationship with God would provide for me.

That day in my restaurant when I saw her for the first time, I was involved with someone. I can't even remember who. Walking to the table where she sat, my knees were shaking and my palms were sweaty, but I managed to ask her out. She smiled, as if considering my request for dinner, but a mutual friend ruined the moment by declaring that if I ever asked Lily out again, she would kill me and break both of Lily's legs! That was courtesy of my wild reputation at the time. Lily threw her head back in laughter and smiled as she shook her head.

"Maybe someday, Brian, but I have just left a marriage that was a catastrophe. I can't afford any more of those."

I nodded and smiled but felt sick inside. That could have been the beginning, but I would not give up. She was worth the humiliation. I would beg if necessary, although I truly hoped that I would not have to get down on my knees in my restaurant and grovel at her feet. Time went slowly past during which she sold real estate, and I worked on building various projects and enjoying my latest restaurant. Since I had hired a great manager, I really did little to ensure the success of my restaurant Chandlers. Now I was spending more time in Abaco making sure the house was completed so that it would be perfect when I finally took her home.

About a year passed. I found myself one day sitting in my Rolls-Royce Corniche at a traffic light wondering which decision to make over possibly purchasing a new restaurant. Recently, I had finally divorced my wife after years of living apart. I know this sounds selfish, but I wanted to come before Lily with the truth, not the lies and deceptions of the past. Thoughts of her were always on my mind.

When I turned to my left, I was delighted to notice that she was stopped at the same light. There was a lane between us, but it was empty due to the early hour. She was on her cell phone. I could hear her since I had the top

down that spring morning. Without a thought as to what I was doing, I left the Rolls-Royce's engine running and ran over two lanes to where she innocently sat. When she saw me, she looked a little irritated. At that moment, I realized that she too loved the deals. Just another thing in common, I smiled.

“Lily, will you consider going out with me now? It has been at least a year. Look, I'm going to my home in the Bahamas tomorrow. I am going to end a relationship that is not working. When I return, can I phone you? It would really mean a great deal to me if we could have dinner.” How lame was that?

She removed the phone from her ear and smiled. “Sure, Brian, why not? I could use some diversion. Let's have lunch, nothing serious like dinner. Call me.” With that statement, both of our lives were changed forever as she handed me her business card with the treasured phone number.

I ran back to my car just in time for the light to change and watched her drive away. Laughter wracked my old body as I realized that this was it. This old soldier who had suspected that he would never know real love and commitment may have just found what he had always hoped to discover. I knew at that moment we would be together till death.

