

Our Hearts Remember

by
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Formerly titled *The Greatest Gift*

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**“In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life:
It goes on.”**

-Robert Frost

**No man knows when his hour will come:
As fish are caught in a cruel net,
Or birds are taken in a snare,
So men are trapped by evil times
That fall unexpectedly upon them.**

-Ecclesiastes 9:12

CHAPTER 1

Patricia Gillespie

If I had known when I awoke that July morning that it would be the last day of my life when everyone I loved was safe and well, I would have savored the welcome feelings of innocence and contentment.

I guess I did know, or at least suspect, that a change was coming, but I expected a change in the weather, not in my life as I knew it.

For a few months, I had felt an uneasy heaviness each morning when I awoke. It was as if the weight of my body had left its imprint on the soft cotton bedclothes of our wide, king-sized bed.

Often, I would open my eyes and reach out to touch the space where Mac's familiar lanky frame usually lay, only to find it empty. He had risen long before me to quietly dress and leave me to my fitful bout with Morpheus.

The day that forever changed all our lives began in quite an ordinary manner. I remember stretching out my left leg and feeling Digger's lumpy warm weight.

Lately, he would often leave a damp spot on the mattress pad, unless I had awakened in time to let him out to do his business. He lifted his head for a moment as I rolled out of bed and then curled more tightly into a ball and

went back to sleep. If ever there were an example of the ravages of old age, it was he.

I remembered so well his puppy days when he would bounce off the bed and beg to go for his morning walk. Now, when he was good and ready, he would drag his low-hanging belly to the edge of the bed and wait until Mac or I gently lowered him to the floor. Then he would slowly and stiffly move his fifteen-year-old creaky bones toward the kitchen where his water bowl sat. Food had become less and less appealing to him. We kept changing brands of dog food to tempt him, but he would take a bite or two, sniff and walk away. I knew his days were numbered, but I refused to accept it in my heart.

I ran a brush through my hair and squinted into the mirror while brushing my teeth. In the early morning light, through myopic blue eyes, my skin looked smoother, the lines less etched. Not too bad for a sixty-two year old bag-of-bones, I thought, and smiled at my image through the Colgate froth in my mouth.

I rummaged through the bottom drawer of my dresser, holding on to the top of it with one hand until the wave of dizziness passed. The feeling was slight today and did not compare to the spell I had experienced a few days earlier that caused me to careen into the edge of the coffee table and bruise my left leg. “Just call me ‘Grace,’” I had muttered as I rubbed my leg.

Today, I shook off the feeling and then dressed quickly in my one-piece bathing suit. As usual, I would spend most of the day poolside in the backyard. The ninety-eight degree July temperature and dry El Paso air was made for swimming.

When I walked into the kitchen, Mac looked up over his reading glasses, lowered the paper, and waggled his bushy eyebrows. “Good morning, my little butter cup.”

As usual, he was in a lightsome mood, his only other one being one of icy silence when he was angry or sad. Mac was never lukewarm. Luckily I could measure his silent times in mere days while his booming good humor decorated the weeks, months, and years of our forty-two years together.

To remain in love with a man I had met as a twenty-year-old girl was a rare gift, and to have him love me still with passion and patience was no less than a miracle.

“Hi, sweetie.” I planted a kiss on the shiny dome where his curly dark hair used to be and ran my fingers down his back.

He smelled of soap and Mennen shave cream. Clean and spicy. I went to the cabinet and took out a mug and saucer, plopped a bagel in the toaster oven, and placed a cup of water in the microwave. Three minutes later, I sat down to my usual breakfast of Earl Gray tea and a bagel slathered with cream cheese.

“Were you up late last night?” he asked. “I fell asleep reading in bed.”

“I know. Who do you think took off your glasses and tucked you in? I watched the end of that awards show and ten minutes of the news.”

“Want the paper?” he asked while folding it neatly.

“Later. I’m behind schedule. Gotta get the pump started and clean the pool. Then I’ll make some cookie dough. Patti Cake and Alaina will be here about noon.”

He reached for my hand that was cupping my forehead and pulled on it.

“What’s wrong, hon? Headache?”

Realizing I had been applying pressure to both brow bones, I relaxed my fingers. The dull pain tightened steadily like a mask around my eyes.

“Just a bit dizzy. I slept too long. That’s what a slug-a-bed deserves, as my father used to say.”

“Nobody deserves a headache, Patricia. What’s up with that anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“Sleeping late. You’re doing that a lot now. This is the first time we’ve had breakfast together in some time. I’m usually gone.”

“Lazy, I guess.” I smiled at him as he stacked his dishes in the sink. No tea and toast for Mackenzie Gillespie. He ate rolled oats and fruit chased by black coffee, and then sometimes grabbed a doughnut on his way out the door.

“Gotta fortify myself,” he’d say. “Could be lotsa big guns out there in the jungle.” Then he’d close the back door and climb into his ancient, faded mustard-colored VW Beetle and drive to the high school where one hundred twenty-two teachers, thirty-five staff members and twenty-eight hundred students depended on their principal to guide them, or at least allow them the freedom to set their own course, in both the literal and figurative sense.

This morning he lingered after sliding his arms into his suit coat and shooting his starched white cuffs.

I love him completely, I realized in a calm, contented way. After nearly four decades the passion now came in waves with the ebb and flow of my prescription hormones. At the ebb he was my young, fierce lover again, and the rest of the time he was a necessary part of me like my eyes or my lungs.

“You’ll be late.”

“I have a meeting at Central.” He smiled at me. “I’ll skip the back slapping and coffee hour and have one more cup with you,”

I knew he was worried. “I’m fine, Mac. Headache’s almost gone. I just needed some caffeine.” I rose to stand in front of him and rested my chin on his breastbone.

He put his hands on my bare arms and slid them up and down. “You’re thin, Patricia. Thin and brown.”

I took a step back. “Well, thank you. I think. You make me sound like a pretzel stick.”

He lifted his eyes upward toward the ceiling and then back down to my face. “You’re as beautiful as always, but I wish you’d put some meat on your bones.”

“You’re a worry wart. You’d rather be married to Mama Cass?”

He laughed at me and kissed me soundly. No dry chicken pecks for him either. Mac never wasted kisses, which was another thing I loved about him.

“What’s the plan for today?”

“Swimming and decorating cookies for Patti Cake and me. Alaina’s got to go to a meeting at the Civic Center. Oh, and we might go to Dairy Queen.”

He smiled, and I knew he was thinking of the two other women in his life.

“Have fun and kiss my girls for me. I’m off.”

A wave of dizziness ebbed and flowed as I stood at the window and watched his car until it was a pale yellow spot on the road. Then, I went into the bathroom and rummaged around for the extra-strength Tylenol. Maybe Mac was right. I would try to eat more, even though my appetite wasn’t that great. A slight feeling of nausea clung to me.

My five-year-old namesake and my only daughter would be arriving in just over three hours, and I wanted to feel better before they arrived. Taking care of Patti Cake was a joy for me and a big help to her mother.

“I feel safer when she’s with you than when she’s with me,” Alaina had once said.

Balderdash, of course. But flattery would get her a baby-sitter, and I would get to kiss my granddaughter’s soft, rosy cheeks as much as I wished. She’s such a delicious child, I thought.

Ten minutes after Mac left, I opened the French doors and went out into the backyard. A wide-brimmed hat and dark glasses protected my face and shoulders, but even though I always plastered on the sunscreen, by now the skin on my body was as brown as a pecan shell and almost as tough.

I had been a swimmer for my whole adult life after becoming a fierce competitor in college. When Mac offered to buy me a diamond ring for our twenty-fifth anniversary, I’d said no, please, I’d rather have a pool.

I opened the valve to raise the water level, then gathered up the ten-foot pole, the hose and roller foot and dropped them into the clear water. After filling the hose with water, I fitted the loose end into the skimmer return hole and watched bubbles rise as the vacuum sucked in water forcing out any remaining air.

I began slowly pushing the pole forward and then pulling it back through the water creating a clean, white path as the fine layer of West Texas sand disappeared as if by magic.

I enjoyed the smell of the chlorine, the cool splash of the water, and the heat of the sun on my back. It took almost forty minutes to vacuum the pool and another fifteen to clean the leaves out of the skimmers, test the water, and add the correct amount of acid, chlorine, and algaecide.

Mindful of Patti Cake’s visit, I locked the chemicals in a cabinet in the garage and put the key up on a hook high above the door. I knew that even the sweetest of children have a criminal sense of curiosity.

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