

The Mourning After

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AT LEAST THE KIDS WERE GONE, settled among family for the next ten or twelve hours. That gave him some time to pull himself together, to sort things out before tomorrow, before the rest of his life.

As he pulled into the driveway, the house looked terribly familiar, even the dusk's slant of light and the shadows of the trees stretching across the front yard made everything seem normal. He glanced at his watch: 5:45. He half expected, no hoped, to see Maggie there, framed in the doorway behind the screen door, waiting to greet him. He had vowed he wouldn't, but as he got out of his car, he glanced wistfully at the doorway.

Funny, he thought, how truth and reason fail to overrule fantasy sometimes. He knew, even as he looked at the door, that she would not be there, that she would never again be there, that yesterday had been the last welcome home greeting he'd ever receive from Maggie.

As he trudged up the front steps, briefcase in hand, he was again glad the house would be quiet. Telling the kids hadn't been easy. The two youngest girls, sensing their father's grief, cried because he cried but hadn't really understood what he explained. "Can we eat at McDonalds?" the three-year-old asked when he had finished. They'd probably cry every night until they forgot her and then, except for a general sense of loss, be over it.

The two older girls concerned him more. Suzette, his moody fourth grader, had already heard (she heard and knew everything) even before he came back from the hospital. She had clutched his arm as he told them about their mother's death, how she had died, and what it meant. A quick trip to the store—no seatbelt—and some kid, some stupid careless high school kid, ran a stop sign.

Tears streamed down Suzette's face. "I'll help you, Dad," her lip quivered in a brave but forced smile. "I'll watch the girls. We'll be okay." He knew she'd try to be mature, like a kid in a Disney movie, and she'd handle it, be Daddy's brave little helper through the whole mess. He knew,

though she'd hide the hurt, hold in the pain until it would finally erupt when they least expected it.

Carrie was different. His curly-headed little six-year-old lover-girl understood the loss but not the reason. She wept out of sympathy for him and her own inner sense of loss. When he left her at his sister's house, her body still quaked with sobs. She would suffer more than any of the other children, maybe almost as much as he would.

He walked through the living room and into the kitchen, setting his briefcase in a kitchen chair on his way to the refrigerator. Taped on the freezer door was the month's ward calendar, courtesy of the Primary; the lower door was plastered with the ribbons, drawings, and bangles that a family with kids in both Primary and elementary school accumulates. He grabbed a jug of milk, poured himself a glass—it would be his only dinner that night—and sat down in his chair at the table.

He should have been thinking about a million things: funeral arrangements, figuring out what to do with the kids, even the basic stuff like laundry and groceries. But he could think only of Maggie. Sitting in the kitchen, he was surrounded with evidence of her existence; he could easily reach out and let his fingers touch the last things her fingers had touched. That would be the closest he could get to her now. The things she left behind remained his only connection to her.

For the last two hours of her life, he had been at her side, at least as close as he was able to be. She never moved—except for the rise and fall of her chest being pumped full of oxygen by the respirator—never opened her eyes, never made a sound.

He tried hard to recall the last time he had touched her living. A quick and light kiss on his way out the door that morning. Was that the last? No, hadn't he stroked her arm as she lay in the hospital bed? Now he wished he had climbed next to her in bed, ignoring the wires and tubes and nurses, to embrace her one last time, to remember how she felt alive. He would have held her tight, memorizing her and storing the memory away for good. But they pushed him out of the room when buzzers and alarms sounded, signalling, he guessed, that her spirit had finally broken free from her body. That was the last he saw of her.

Now the only way for him to take the measure of Maggie was by what she had left behind. A husband, four kids, and a house full of memories and things, her things. Tonight, he decided, he would inventory Maggie: photos, letters, her journals, special articles of clothing, sentimental or family things, the handicraft stuff she had made at Homemaking, old clothes, stacks of magazines she had saved.

And her shoes. Maggie had been a shoes horse, acquiring footwear the way other women acquire jewelry or clothes. And she kept them—all.

After they had been dating for a while, he noticed she wore a different

pair of shoes almost every day. One afternoon she showed him her closet: shoes, in boxes stacked five rows high, covered the entire floor space. She had the running shoes she had worn as a high school cheerleader, the pair she had worn to the prom—and nowhere else, a pair she used exclusively for going to the temple, a pair she'd run in, a pair she'd play volleyball or basketball in, many pairs for church and school, each assigned a specific part of her wardrobe. He, who had never owned more than two pairs of shoes at the same time, had been amazed, first at the expense and later at the fact that she had kept them all. "Some people collect stamps, others rocks; I collect shoes," she said. He smiled at the memory, his first and last smile of the day.

The house was grey now, the sun finally set behind the mountains in the west. Need to turn on some lights, he thought, but he didn't. He liked the close greyness of the house—it seemed to intensify the quiet and the smells, the atmosphere of home. He wondered how long that atmosphere would last without Maggie. He wondered if he'd even be able to bear staying in the same house, the first house they had owned.

Can't keep sitting here, he thought. Need to get moving, to do something. He stood up and walked to their bedroom. The sudden rush startled him—she was there, in the room. He could *feel* her there. His blood pounded through his brain and a tightness in his chest, his heart in a vise, made him sweat. He almost called her name, almost, but he feared it would break the spell. He sat on their bed and closed his eyes. The room pulsed with her presence; the aroma of her perfume, her watercolors on the wall, the scent of the fabric softener she always used, the bed made with the pillows on top of the comforter—her quirky way of making beds, one they had argued over lightly when they first married.

He opened his eyes and blinked to clear his vision. On the nightstand sat the two books she had been reading, an Anne Tyler novel and Bruce McConkie's last book. Maggie's toiletries were arranged neatly atop their dresser, and from where he sat he could see his own reflection in the dresser mirror they each had lined with quotations and scriptures and snatches of verse that inspired or humored them. He stood up and walked to the dresser, careful to keep his back to the closet because, he imagined, even though he knew better—he had seen her body, he knew she was dead—she might be hiding there, waiting to surprise him. And as he thought about it, the clothes hanging in there were his last, his closest contact with her. He resisted the urge to throw open the door and surprise her, or at least to embrace the clothes that once held her, to clutch the closest things he had left of her.

On her side of the mirror, where it had been for years, was a little poem he had written before Suzette was born. He read it again, even though he knew it well.

Me First

Knowing that a thousand years
 are but a day in God's reckoning
 can you blame me, Love,
 for hoping, selfishly,
 that I go first
 so that I might
 have to endure
 only seconds,
 not years,
 without you.

It was the only poem he had ever written outside of school, and the idea for it had come a week before she delivered their first baby. The thought of losing Maggie in childbirth scared him, but not as much as the idea of living the rest of his life without her.

It's ironic, he thought, that she die now, so soon, leaving him with four kids and half a life left to live. No, it wasn't ironic; it was hell. How much easier it would be if *he* had been the one to go. She would have had plenty of life insurance money, and she understood the kids and how to run the house. Friends and family would have helped her out, and she would have married again, even though, when they were newlyweds, she swore she'd never marry another man, even if it meant being a widow for forty years.

Damn. Why did she die? Why now? He wanted to scream, to howl, to smash something. How could he bear it? Would he get used to living without her? Stepping backward, he sat heavily on their bed, the same bed they had used all their married lives.

How do other people do this? Do they try to forget? Is there a way to block out the memories? Does the hollow ache inside the chest fade away after a week, a month, a year? Or does the one left behind just bear it, like a cancer victim, suffering silently a pain only he can understand, accepting well-intentioned platitudes from others but knowing full well that no one really knows the depth of his suffering?

He let himself fall backwards onto their bed where, after a few minutes, he drifted into a fitful sleep. When he awoke the room was completely dark, and as he lay on the bed half-awake, half-asleep, he forgot for a split second that Maggie had died. He turned instinctively expecting to see her sleeping on her left side with her back curved away from him, knees pulled up. She, of course, wasn't there and for a moment the incongruity confused him before reality struck home once more.

Maggie's gone. Dead. And he was alone.

He glanced at their alarm clock. It wasn't yet midnight. He knew he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep that night, not with so much sorting

out left to do. He also knew that he had to unload his feelings somewhere—or if not unload them, at least put them away, close the door on them because when the kids returned home and when all the family showed up, he would have to take charge, to lead the way through the funeral, the mourning after, and the life ahead. If *he* couldn't handle it, his kids would suffer even more, and he could not allow that to happen. They had their whole lives to live and their own problems to deal with, and for their sake he had to accept her death and get on with life.

He sat up in bed, swinging his legs to the floor on Maggie's side. His foot nudged something: the running shoes Maggie had worn that morning. He tried to scoot them under the bed but they wouldn't fit because the space under their bed was filled with boxes of Maggie's shoes. Everywhere he looked, everything he touched, everything he smelled in their bedroom, in their house reminded him of her. There was too much, but not enough. Maggie was all around him, but nowhere. Her things left behind were just things, tangible but unsatisfying mementos of her.

He picked up her jogging shoes and threw them at the wicker wastebasket next to their dresser. Things, memories were not enough. He wanted Maggie, he needed her, and it ate him up to know that for the rest of his life, he couldn't have her.

Never before had he felt so utterly powerless. He hadn't been able to save her, he can't bring her back, and he felt certain he would never shake this unbearable sense of loss. Something inside him—habit—urged him to do something, to pray, to ask the bishop for a blessing, to clean up the house, but grief and helplessness paralyzed him.

Rather than do anything, he just sat on their bed, in the dark, and did nothing. Unable to pray, to call for a blessing, to even move to the closet, he sat there remembering Maggie and wept.