

Until Death

She loved him to death. In her mind, there was no doubt of this. But, of course, over seventy years of marriage, the meaning of love had changed. She knew that at some point when their bodies were younger, less saggy, perhaps even beautiful, they loved each other passionately. At least she assumed they did. Those days were so long ago. The old pictures she still had of them from their early days were grainy, stilted, posed. Their smiles were wooden and awkward, as crisp as the pressed shirts and pants Butch wore and the blouses Barb wore. But she knew they had been happy and passionate because when she looked at these old pictures, something stirred in her that had remained dormant for so long. This thing, which she assumed was lust and the fire of life, never caught flame, but smoldered as an ember beneath years of detritus and shattered memories.

Their love had grown and evolved with them. Through the birth of their three daughters, their love shifted focus, and for a long time their children became the focal point of their lives. It was not until they were all out of the house several decades later that Butch and Barb's orbits reached their perigee. They enjoyed a sort of renaissance then, but even this seemed so distant to her on this particularly cold winter morning.

She had awoken before Butch, which never used to happen, but now it was becoming a regular thing. She gave him a hard time over that. She called him a sleepy head. It was so cold in the room, and it was difficult to shed the sheets to get out of bed; Butch liked to keep the heat off as much as possible. Their daughters berated them for this penny pinching, but Butch thought it was prudent, and Barb knew better than to argue with him.

It was Sunday – she was fairly confident of that. But since they had retired, the days sort of blended. When she was finally able to get out of bed, she shuffled downstairs to the kitchen and toasted four pieces of bread, three for Butch and one for her. She buttered the bread, generously on Butch’s and lightly on her own, before returning to the bedroom to have breakfast in bed with Butch. What luxury.

The universe of their lives had shrunk to all but a single room in a too-large suburban colonial in a New Jersey town that had been farmland back when they were still working and living and raising kids. When they retired, they went on a trip to Italy with their friends for a week. But that was overwhelming, and after that their world shrunk to the state of New Jersey, specifically the stretch of south Jersey between their suburbia and Wildwood at the shore. After a while, though, the drive became too difficult for them and so their world shrunk again, this time to their house and the doctors and the food store. They started to run out of things to talk about, but now they were fused together, almost geologically, through the steady application of pressure and time. Barb couldn’t imagine any life outside of this one, couldn’t imagine life without Butch. Their grandkids thought their dedication to each other was adorable and inspiring and endearing. One even went so far as to say, Gram, I hope one day I’m lucky enough to find a guy and live a life like you and Pop have. That had made Barb happy, even if Butch couldn’t hear it and she had to repeat it to him, shouting over his deafness.

Recently, though, their world had shrunk again. They used to be able to move about the house, albeit slowly. But now their joints were starting to freeze up and their bodies were in a general revolt against further activity. So they spent most of their days in the bedroom in front of the electric glow of the TV, the blinds shut tight to keep away the glare. Butch liked the news, so she had to keep it on that for a while, until she would inevitably complain to him: Butch, it’s

all just so depressing. Even though they had lived through the Depression, the Second World War, McCarthyism, Korea, Vietnam, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the threat of nuclear winter, wars in the Middle East, 9/11, all these were abstractions, and only recently had the world gone down the toilet.

She found that her memories were still there, but they felt like someone else's, like they had been episodes of a TV show she had seen. The link between her own self and the memories had frayed, and now they were floating away like anchorless balloons. One by one they flew up and away, leaving her with less and less. She changed the channel to *Law and Order* reruns. There was no chance that she hadn't seen the episode before, but to her it was brand new every time. Her mind wandered to nowhere: a whiteness and blankness so pure that it cocooned her like a child's blanket. No sooner would the opening montage start on the show than she would emerge from this fugue and catch the rolling of the end credits. Darn, she would think, that episode looked like it was going to be good. Butch, she would ask, did you catch any of that? Was it the jealous boyfriend who did it? But he never paid attention either.

She no longer wondered what Butch was thinking. Over seventy years they had crisscrossed each other's minds, leaving no stone unturned, really getting to know the other person. Seventy years of dinner conversations, breakfast conversations, how was work conversations, before bed conversations. At some point they just lost new things to talk about. Their conversations had become like bird songs: rote and meaningless at face value but signaling an abiding love.

Routine had taken over their lives. Barb felt best when she was on the tracks of her routine. Wake up, pills, breakfast, news, *Law and Order*, tea, pills, movie, sleep. She never had

to think about the routine, and it was what got her through the day. She knew Butch was a creature of habit too. He'd never demand her to stray far from the routine.

There was a noise. This was a strange noise, a noise that was difficult to place. This happened to Barb and Butch a lot. Anything outside the norm or expected was difficult to process. They laid in bed listening to the noise. A ringing, a tingling, distant but still in the house, she was pretty sure. Was it the TV? Is it the TV, Butch? But his deafness reigned.

There it was again. Definitely not the TV. Is that the doorbell, Butch? But she knew he wouldn't get up to check on it. So she swung herself out of the bed that was too high for her now. She had been shrinking for a decade or more and all her clothes drooped off her like she was some old hag, which she knew she assuredly wasn't.

Eventually, she managed to walk down the stairs and undo the front lock. No sooner did she do so than the door swung open and there was a woman standing in the doorway, holding open the screen door, asking Barb questions with lightning speed. Barb couldn't keep up with the words, and she could feel herself shutting down. This person, this stranger, was being so mean to her, why was she being so aggressive and pushy?

Mom, mom, the stranger was saying. The stranger was holding her by the shoulders now and when it became quiet and she could take her bearings, Barb realized the stranger was her daughter. She knew it was her daughter. She was delighted at this revelation and ignored everything that she hadn't comprehended and said, Carrie, it's so good to see you! I'm getting so old, now, Carrie, it takes me and your father so long to get around this house.

It's Lindsay, mom, not Carrie. Carrie is in California now, remember.

But Barb's brain wasn't interested in learning new things, or remembering things told to her so long ago. She was just so happy to have her daughter in her presence. The memory balloons kept floating away but the feelings in her heart stayed, inexplicable as usual. It was love, she knew that. She loved this woman standing expectantly in front of her, in her doorway. One memory that has stayed: Remember that time when you were five and I took you girls to my work and let you walk next door to the drug store to buy candy?

She didn't hear her daughter's response. She was lost in a fog of half memories and flares of imagination that kaleidoscoped in front of her eyes, as real as her own baby in front of her.

Next thing she knows, Barb was sitting at the kitchen table, and all the lights were on. Carrie was at the thermostat, turning it way up. Deep from within the basement the heater clicked on with difficulty. Mom, why the hell is it so cold in here.

Oh, your father will not like you using up all this electricity. Costs a lot of money you know.

But mom it's freezing in here. I can practically see my breath.

How's Rob, honey? And how is California? Are you liking it out there? But Barb didn't wait to listen to the answer. She was already up and shuffling toward the cabinet. She may not be all she used to be, but she prided herself on being a good host. And how could she be a good host if she didn't brew her daughter up some tea and put out some cookies. I know we have cookies in one of these tins, could you be a doll and help me open this?

She held out an old tin in shaking hands, with eyes as wide and pleading as a child's.

Mom, where's dad?

For some reason, her daughter wasn't helping with the tin, so she'd just try to open it herself. She tucked it in tight against her body. Looking down at the tin, she realized she's still in her night gown. Oh dear, she says. How embarrassing, I'm still in my nightgown. I'm sorry, honey, we weren't expecting you. Let me go put on some clothes.

She put the tin down on the kitchen counter, but not all the way, and it fell to the floor with a clang. It popped open and cookies—plain, wooden things—tumbled out of the tin. Mom, these cookies are stale and hard as a rock.

Barb waved off the cookies and shuffled back toward the stairs, trying to get back to the bedroom to change. She was laser focused. That was something people always remarked about her, she remembered, or thinks she remembered. That would be something she would have liked to have heard people say about her.

She was trying to walk but all of a sudden, she couldn't any more. She said to her legs, Walk walk walk, and then questioned them, Walk? But at some point, her commands weren't doing anything to her body. She tried to take stock of the situation and, looking down her own arm, which felt alien to her, she saw that her daughter had grabbed her by the elbow and was holding her back. She followed the arresting arm up to its owner's face, who was just a half-stranger's face in an infinitude of faces. The face registered something deep in her brain, and up bubbled the only thing she could think to say: When are we going to get to see Robbie again?

Mom, where's dad?

Butch. Her mind drifted to Butch, the last colossus standing in her ruins of her consciousness. Everything else had chipped and fallen away, but Butch remained her constant.

Gosh she loved him. Not that she really knew what that meant any more, but she knew she loved him and couldn't bear to live without him. Where was he? Why hadn't he gotten off his lazy behind and come down to see their guest yet?

To the face she said, Butch has been feeling under the weather lately. He's been staying in bed a lot. I'll tell him you stopped by.

How long has he been in bed, mom?

We tried staying up to watch the ball drop on New Year's. But Butch feel asleep. I never make it to midnight.

The thought of midnight made her suddenly tired. She wanted some tea. A nice little kick of tea is just what she needed. Tea would get her back on track, back on routine. Like a bad swimmer thrown into the deep end, she was desperate to reach the pool's edge, where she could cling onto and recover her breath.

She tried lighting the stove top but couldn't get the fire going. It was clicking but nothing was happening.

Mom, New Year's was two weeks ago. Where is dad?

Barb turned and looked at the woman standing in her kitchen. She was unrecognizable to her. She vaguely understood that she was related to her, but there the connection ended. This was no girl she had raised. Her girls were all little girls forever. Frozen in eternal youth in the cracking celluloid of the pictures hanging by old magnets on the kitchen refrigerator. She wouldn't be rude to this woman, though. That wasn't in her nature; she was raised better than that.

Butch is upstairs. He's been sleeping for a couple days now, darling, she said with a smile and soft eyes that shone with an animalistic emptiness.