

“MY SON’S GRANDMOTHER”

The hospital was noisy but orderly chaos. It took the doctor a while to find a quiet place where they could talk. The doctor was young for a surgical oncologist, still in his thirties. He made no attempt to nuance it. “She’s dying, Mr. Hayes. Her kidneys are shutting down. She has only a few more days to live.”

Ford wasn’t surprised. These were words he had expected to hear years before.

“Can I keep her here?”

“Afraid not. They need the room, and the insurance wouldn’t pay for it anymore. They’ll pay for a hospice, though.” He handed Ford a brochure. “Here’s some info on one of the nicest ones around. Only a few miles from here. It’s a beautiful place.”

Ford shook the young doctor’s hand. “You guys have done a fantastic job.”

“We do our best, Mr. Hayes. Even if it’s only life extension. Your mom helped, though. She’s a tough lady. Just wouldn’t give up. Every time I saw her she was asking when could I reverse her coloscopy. Definitely not a fan of wearing the bag.”

Ford walked back into the hospital room, forgetting he still had the hospice brochure in his hand. His mother was 88 and, although she suffered from a number of maladies, none had to do with dementia. She took note of the brochure.

“What’s that?”

“Something the doc gave me.”

“Give it to me.”

He passed it to her and silently watched as she leafed through it.

“A goddamned hospice. I’ve had it now.”

She was too shrewd for him to argue otherwise. They didn’t send patients who had even a remote chance of getting well to a hospice. There may have been patients who defied the odds and walked out of a hospice, but he guessed they would all fit into a very small phone booth.

They chased him out of her room at ten, but not before she could ask him once again if Jake, his son and her only grandson, had called. Jake had lived with her for four

years as he drank and partied his way through college, eking out gentleman C grades. She had formed a special attachment to him, as he reveled her with stories of his wild antics in his fraternity house 100 miles down the road at UM.

Ford theorized Jake was her avatar and that she did a good deal of vicarious living through him. Henry V had died years before, and she was lonely in the big house he had left her. She made it worth Jake's time to spend his free time with her.

A nurse advised Ford they would transfer his mother to the hospice the next morning. Visiting hours began at one p.m., and the directions to the hospice were on the brochure.

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Of course the place was beautiful. It was a hospice.

His mother was in the last bedroom in the lakeside section of the hospice. It had large windows on its southern and western sides. The southern windows showcased a vivid blue lake. A small lake, Ford deduced, as trees on the other side were very near. The western windows looked out on large oak trees thoughtfully spaced and carefully policed of brush or fallen debris to avoid any suggestion of the intrusion of woodland. It was midday, and the sun was shining softly through the oaks and creating a mellow glow in the bedroom. The blinds had been raised to the top of the window and the heavy curtains, covered in a soothing light gray fabric, had been drawn to the sides of four tall windows.

There were no boats on the lake, and Ford doubted there ever were. The lake was a prop, meant to soothe and comfort and relax. There was not a sound of activity from outside. Inside the room, he could hear an occasional muffled voice. Sometimes a phone rang, but someone would quickly pick it up and speak softly into it. Never a prolonged conversation. Almost absolute serenity and solitude, totally unlike the hospital he and his mother had been in the night before.

She was napping when he arrived at the hospice, so he had pulled a chair close to the windows overlooking the lake to enjoy the view. He wondered why they would bother to have blinds and heavy curtains available to block such a beautiful view.

Maybe some patients preferred to spend their final days and hours closeted from the outside world, he mused, and didn't care to be reminded they would soon be taking leave of such things as inviting lakes and shady oak trees. So, please, nurse, they might ask, would you lower the blinds and close the curtains? The view's a little depressing, Thank you.

Others, perhaps, might want to enjoy the world they're departing as long as possible. Open the windows wide, please, nurse. Let in as much light as possible. There, isn't that a magnificent view? Thank you.

His musing upon this great mystery of end of life was interrupted when he heard his mother rousing from her nap. He pulled his chair close to her bed, which was covered with the same gray material as the drapes. She was frail from cancer and radiation and chemo and had looked small even in her body-sized hospital bed. Her hospice bed was queen-sized, and in its expanse she looked almost child-like.

She wasn't fully awake yet, and the unfamiliar surroundings had her a trifle confused. Even with her advanced age and terminal illness, she still somehow managed to look younger than she actually was. She had been a beautiful woman in her youth, a Miss Dayton who just missed becoming Miss Ohio. The girl who had edged her out had gone on to win Miss America. "Who knows," she had often speculated, "If I had shook my ass a few more times at the judges, I might have been Miss America."

Possibly, Ford conceded, but his mother was a notorious flirt, and although he had not been around at the time, he was confident she had flirted to the maximum extent with any male judges who might have been admiring her anatomy.

In any event, the Miss Dayton title came with some benefits, even though it was 1934 and the height of the Great Depression. The benefits were not pecuniary, as in prize money, but rather attention from men who had money. The definition of "having money" in those days had been obscured by the depression and went so far in some cases as to include almost anyone having a steady job.

His mother's name was Vickie, and every man she met wanted to sleep with her. But she understood market value and brusquely rejected the heavy breathing of would-be seducers. And so she was until she met Ford's father, who had a steady job and was willing to proffer up a wedding ring. Little did he suspect he would be the first rung up an extensive divorce ladder.

Her talent in the beauty competitions was dancing, and she had a dancer's slim, athletic body. Her teeth, and this was in an era when the last thing on a person's mind was dental care, were perfect. Her hair was on the dark side of blonde, but she helped it along chemically until it possessed the hue of polished gold. She was blessed with large blue eyes and lashes so long an admirer might think them fake unless he were fortunate enough to get close and inspect them for himself. Bottom line, she was an extraordinarily attractive woman, even into her elder years. As she got older, though, the maintenance time grew.

No matter, she happily put the time in.

Ford had inherited the mundane looks of his father, Augustus, tall and brown-haired with wide, deep-set brown eyes beneath a furrowed brow. He had his mother's long lashes, but his eyes were weak and he had to wear glasses early on. And his thick brown hair had not lasted long. He was experimenting with comb-overs by his thirties, and, by his forties, had given up and capitulated to sporting more skin than hair.

Still, he had married well, a lovely brunette named Gwen, whom he had met in law school. Looks and love of law aside, he was fatally drawn to her when he learned she was an avid golfer like himself. He asked her to prove it when she boasted she could break 80 on the par 72 UM golf course. She promptly did so, in fact, shooting a 78. With all that going for them, it was almost inevitable that they would fall in love and marry.

They had one son, Jake, who for reasons Ford could never fathom, had the blonde hair and blue eyes and striking good looks and impulsive ways of Vickie. Ford attributed it to some sort of skipped-generation syndrome. Having been trained as a lawyer to verify facts, he even went so far as to see if such a syndrome actually existed.

It purportedly did not. Genes cannot, per se, skip a generation, The manifestation of genes, or their traits, can, however, skip generations under certain circumstances, the circumstances being that in his case, his father evidently passed on genes to him that negated some genes passed on to him by his mother. If not the genes themselves, then at least the manifestations or traits of the genes.

Semantics, he decided. Sounded like skipped-generation syndrome to him. The bottom line was that he and his mother were nothing alike. His son and his mother were virtual clones, excepting gender, of course. Identical twins in every respect. Just born two generations apart.

She was fully awake now.

“How long you been here?”

He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “Fifteen minutes or so, Vickie.”

“How'd I get here?”

“They brought you in an ambulance last night.”

“I don't remember a thing.”

“Like your view?”

“Help me sit up, so I can inspect it.”

He slid her up, which was easy, given her slightness, and placed an extra pillow behind her. She fussed with the pillow a bit until she was in a good position to consider the expansive view afforded by the four tall windows.

“Norman Rockwell,” she pronounced.

“Don’t like it?”

“Looks staged. “

“Want me to close the drapes?”

“No,” she quickly said.

He now knew which side she came down on with respect to opening or closing the curtains. She was a “I want to see all the lakes and trees and light I can before I go” kind of person, even if they did look staged. Not a huge surprise to him.

Ford was only 20 years younger, and it wouldn’t be much longer, he speculated, before he might be making a decision as to whether he wanted to close the curtains or not. Blindfold or no blindfold in a manner of speaking. Or he might get lucky and get run over by a semi and not have to wrestle with such momentous decisions.

“Has Jake called?”

Jake again. “No.”

“Does he know I’m...”

“Yes, I called him last night.”

“And?”

“Left a voice mail you were in hospice.”

“He’s probably busy on a new project.”

“He is.”

“What kind of project is it?”

“It’s more of a ‘who kind of project.’ ”

“Kimberly and the kids?”

“No, Janet and the kid he’s having with *her*.”

“You don’t know that.”

“As a matter of fact I do.”

“How?”

“He let it drop when he was putting the touch on me a few weeks ago.”

“You part with any money?”

“No.”

“You’re so penurious, Ford. He’s your son.”

“Which gives me special insight into him.”

“You’re still annoyed because I signed Oxford Manor over to him.”

“I do live there.”

“You can still live there.”

Ford nodded as if that were true. Jake had already put the Manor up for sale.

“He’d get the house eventually anyway. What the hell’s the difference?”

And so it went, a conversation they’d had dozens of times. He, the prosecutor of his son and she, a Johnny Cochran rising to his defense. No matter what Jake did, the glove never fit. So, Ford invariably caved and chose to acquit by changing the subject.

“Can I bring you anything from home, Vickie?”

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Vickie had been only 19 when Ford was born, and she didn’t relish the world knowing such a beautiful and desirable young woman already had a child. So, when he was older and coherent enough to follow orders, she instructed him to address her as Vickie. By then she had divorced Augustus and moved in with her mother and father, whom he could call Mom and Dad if he so desired. But the inviolate rule was he was to call her Vickie.

World War Two was on the horizon by then. A large Air Force Base was nearby and many young officers came calling. The last thing she wanted was some rug-rat running around calling her “Mommy” and cramping her style. She’d break the mommy news to a suitor later if the courtship flourished. By then she would have her suitor panting so hard her having multiple rug-rats would have been of little consequence.

That was the modus operandi thereafter.

Ford had never called her Mom. Always Vickie.

He was her only child, and he heard many times how his coming upon the scene had ruined her trim figure. So, no more kids for her. The many officers attending her didn't agree about birthing having diminishing her figure. She was as desirable as ever to them, but her bedroom door was always shut tight unless a suitor had a wedding ring with which to unlock it. Given her appeal and the uncertainties of the war, marriage offers flooded in. Young pilots didn't exactly have their futures guaranteed. They could well be dead in a matter of months. So, they were of a mind to marry, and especially to do so with someone as delectable as Vickie. People didn't have affairs in those days. If they wanted a change of partner, they were more likely to do so through the divorce route.

Ford later characterized it as the Liz Taylor malaise.

Vickie began a series of war-time marriages, each lasting about 18 months. The scenario was the same each time. A six-month courtship, then a marriage of six months until the new husband had completed his flight training and sent overseas. Six more months more would elapse, during which letters of eternal love would be exchanged. But Vickie would soon grow restless. A new and even more handsome young officer would appear, and she would permit herself to be swept off her feet. But first there would have to be a divorce, which the panting new suitor gladly paid for.

Ford had no memory of Augustus, or at least no memory of him while he was married to his mother. He saw him occasionally in the years following the divorce. Augustus knew he had been lured onto the rocks by a siren named Vickie, and, for some reason, held his failure to better navigate against Ford. Ford was puzzled by this.

Until Augustus explained, that is. Ford was 10 or so at the time.

“You're the reason she left me.”

“What did I do?”

“She never wanted a kid. Blamed me 'cause you came along.”

After Augustus, there was Karl, Dale, Harlon, and finally, the best of the group, Henry, who Ford dubbed Henry V. Harlon, unhappily, did not need to be divorced. In addition to the bad luck he'd already incurred in marrying Vickie, the B-29 he was piloting over Tokyo was shot down in the last few days of the war. The distraught widow received a check for \$10,000 and a pension, which she happily accepted until Henry V, who was a prominent attorney with lots of old money, appeared on the scene.

Henry, unlike his predecessors, knew full well what he was getting into. In fact, he, or one of the underlings at his firm, had handled her three divorces. Henry was 20 years older than Vickie and was wise to her ways. He had been married several times before himself, so he knew the many pratfalls of marriage. He understood especially the needs and whims of Vickie. And he acquiesced to them. He allowed her to stray off the range once in a while, but gently tugged on the reins when she strayed too far or too often.

Vickie clearly understood her job description. Occasional sex with a 55 year old man and posing as the beautiful and charming wife of a prominent attorney. Henry especially loved dinner parties at his large house, which he had grandly named Oxford Manor. Vickie was expected to throw these parties together, sometimes with only a few days' notice, and then preside gracefully over them. Vickie, whether she knew it or not, was to Oxford Manor born. She performed her duties in a magnificent fashion.

Henry worked hard and played hard. One might have called him both a perfectionist and a hedonist. Still, he weathered these afflictions well and presented a somewhat enviable countenance. Yes, he looked prosperous, with a slight paunch and a slump caused by either bending too much to read law books or leaning forward too often to sip Martinis or perhaps keeping his eyes on too many golf balls. He was tall and lean, nonetheless, with a tanned face and a visibly intelligent look in his always amused brown eyes.

He was a man of unfailingly good humor and disposition. A pleasure to be around. He laughed heartily when he learned Ford had dubbed him Henry V and promptly donned his Shakespearian cloak and recited verbatim his predecessor Henry V's Battle of St. Crispin's Day speech. "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers..."

Ford was 15 when Henry came into his life. By remarkable coincidence, Ford had developed an affinity for golf and was on the high school golf team. Henry bought a new set of golf clubs each year and immediately earned Ford's undying allegiance by gifting him a \$300 set of last years' golf clubs in a hand-tooled leather bag worth twice that.

Ford put the clubs to good use. By the time he was 18, he had a zero handicap and had won the club championship twice. He and Henry won the annual father/son trophy three consecutive years. It was no surprise when UM offered Ford a golfing scholarship.

Henry funded law school for Ford and brought him into his firm when he graduated number three in his class, two spots beneath Gwen, his soon-to-be wife. Henry served as Ford's best man when he and Gwen married. He gifted Ford a sizeable trust fund and treated him as his own son. He had only one condition which he laid out to Ford at the beginning of their very cordial relationship.

“What is it?” Ford asked.

“I’d like for you to call me Dad.”

Henry died 10 years later. He suffered a heart attack just after he had hit a magnificent approach shot on the par five 12th hole of the country club golf course. It was one of the toughest par fives in the state. The caddy raced for help.

Ford was holding Henry as they waited for the ambulance. Although he was in severe pain, Henry looked up at him and smiled. “Did I reach the green, old Sport.?”

“You’re ten feet from the cup, Dad,” Ford responded. “It’s going to be a tricky putt, but I think you’ve got a decent chance at an eagle.”

He told the EMS crew he would meet them at the hospital.

First, though, and acting on compulsion that even he did not quite understand, he walked to the 12th hole green and studied Henry’s approach shot. Henry’s ball was indeed about 10 feet from the cup and, as Ford had foreseen, a tricky putt. Ford studied the putt for several minutes, as if he were putting for the club championship. The putt was slightly uphill and would fade to the left. He took Henry’s putter and struck the ball. He had read the putt correctly. The ball coasted into the cup as if it were on a rail.

He penciled in a 3 for his dad on the score card. An eagle.

He rushed to his car to join Henry. Henry died several hours later, but not before Ford showed him the score card and told him he had scored an eagle on the toughest hole at the country club. Ford realized it was myth that a man could truly die happy, but the look on Henry’s face convinced Ford it was possible for an avid golfer to come close if he had hit a fantastic golf shot just prior to his heart attack and subsequent demise.

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A hospice nurse stopped Ford in the hall when he took a restroom break. She was an older woman, a little on the plump side, with gray hair and extraordinarily kind eyes. Central casting could not have sent over a more perfect actress for a hospice nurse. She spoke to him in a soft voice.

“It doesn’t do any good, you know.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Arguing with them.”

“Arguing?” He repeated.

“Voices carry in here. I could tell you were upset with her. Happens all the time.”

“What does?”

“Loved ones arguing with patients because they won’t eat or drink. It’s just nature’s way. The body is shutting down. Eating and drinking is repulsive to a dying patient. You have to understand that,” she said compassionately. “In a day or two she’ll be comatose, and it will be up to you then to take her hands and tell her it’s okay for her to die. She’ll want to stay so you won’t have to grieve.”

He had leafed through the brochure they’d given him and read that. The nurse had apparently overheard their discussion about Jake. and, unable to discern the specifics, had concluded from the tone of their conversation he had been pushing his mother to eat and drink so she could stay around longer. The brochure hinted it was a form of grief denial on the part of loved ones. They should release the person and accept the grief.

“It’s easier for them if you just let them go.”

Interesting theory, he thought. But theory, nonetheless. He could not help but feel he would be suspicious of someone encouraging him to hurry up and die.

“I understand. I’ll try to do that.”

“I’m Pam.”

“I’m Ford, her son.”

“I know. You just let me know if there’s anything you or your mother need.”

“Thank you, Pam.”

He was annoyed, not at Pam, but at himself. It was always hard for him to accept her unwavering defense of Jake. He had indeed been petulant in that conversation.

His mother was alert the next day, but her voice had deepened into almost a hoarse whisper. Her beautiful blue eyes which had always been so bright and clear had dulled into a pale and barely discernible gray. She realized it was time for her to get on his cell and start saying her goodbyes while she still could. He spent the day at her side listening to her console friends and relatives awkwardly trying to console her.

He tried several times to get Jake on the phone for her. Voicemail each time.

Ford tried to make conversation with her following the goodbyes. Not much to talk about. She had long since settled all of her estate affairs, which he didn’t particularly

care to talk about anyway. Almost everything was bequeathed to Jake. She began to speak aimlessly, though, and then, as if a button had been pushed, she began to drift off,

Her eyes became blank and vacant. He knew she was drifting into coma.

She was comatose when he arrived the next day. He sat by her bed and watched silently as she breathed long, deep breaths. Although he still had his doubts about the “letting go” theory, he took her hands in his and began to speak to her. He told her he loved her and that it was okay with him if she decided to leave. Still, she clung on.

Her eyes were clamped shut. She had not moved or spoken since he had arrived.

He took out his cell and called Jake. It began to ring. And ring.

“Goddamn it, Jake, answer the phone!”

To his surprise Jake answered.

“Hey, Dad. What’s up? How’s Grandma doing?”

“If you ever checked your voicemail, you might know.”

“Yeah,” he acknowledged. “Gotta start doing that.”

“Vickie’s dying, Jake.”

“Jesus, Dad, I’m sorry to hear that. If I had known she was that bad off, I’d have driven up to see her. Or maybe you could’ve sent me an airline ticket or something. I knew she had cancer and that it was just a matter of time, but I figured tough as she was she’d outlive us all, you know?”

No, he didn’t know. He’d made it clear weeks ago her situation was tenuous.

He decided to let Jake say goodbye to her. She was comatose and wouldn’t hear him, but at least Jake wouldn’t be able to complain later he’d been denied the opportunity to say goodbye.

“Listen, Jake, Vickie’s awake, but she can’t talk. I’m going to put the phone by her ear, and I want you to talk to her.”

“Jesus, Dad. What the hell do I say to her?”

Ford sighed and begged the gods for patience. “Tell her you love her, Jake, that she’s been a great grandmother, and that you’ll miss her very much. Tell her that it’s okay for her to go.”

“Go? Go where?”

“That it’s okay for her to die.”

“Why would I want to tell her that? You sure you’re okay, Dad?”

He patiently explained the hypothesis of how dying people tried to hang on longer than they needed to because they didn’t want their loved ones to be grief-stricken when they died. Ford now so doubted the science behind it he had downgraded it from theory to borderline hypothesis.

“That’s weird, Dad.”

He agreed but nonetheless put heat in his request. “Jake, for once in your life will you cooperate? This is a tough time for me, and I would really appreciate it if you simply did as I asked.”

There was a pause as he mulled over Ford’s request. Jake, as usual, was looking for a road less traveled to take, but he sensed his father was about to lose it, so he reluctantly gave in.

“Okay, Dad. Whatever you want.” He expelled his breath drama-queen style.

Ford had expected more pushback. A small but unexpected victory.

“I’m putting the phone to her ear now, Jake. Now, tell her what I told you.”

Jake mumbled an okay. Ford placed the phone next to Vickie’s ear.

He couldn’t decipher what his son was saying, but he could faintly hear the sound of him speaking. He was being fairly loquacious, which surprised Ford. Who knew what he was saying or would say? He was 35 years old going on 15. Ford could only hope Jake was following script.

He was watching Vickie carefully as Jake spoke. Suddenly her eyes popped open. To Ford’s absolute amazement, they were a bright blue, so clear, so alert, virtually aglow with happiness. Her lips parted, and she silently mouthed, “I love you, Jake.”

That was what she was saying. He had no doubt.

He took his cell away, told his son goodbye, and clicked off.

Vickie closed her eyes as soon as he withdrew the phone. Her breathing quickly grew troubled, and the time between breaths increased. This went on for a few minutes, and then she took a deep, almost gasping breath. A heavy expulsion of air followed. He waited for her to inhale again. And waited and waited. No more breaths.

He began to cry, the first time he had cried since the death of his wife ten years before. He had been crying then for Gwen, whom he had loved and who had loved him in return. Before that he had cried for Henry V, who had asked to be called “Dad”.

He felt Pam’s soft touch on his shoulder.

“Is she gone?” She asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Mom’s gone.”

“I heard you talking so lovingly to her, Ford. I told you it makes it so much easier for them to pass when someone they really love tells them it’s okay to go.”

He nodded as they walked from the room.

“I didn’t agree with you at first, Pam, but now I think you’re right.”

THE END.