

Act as if There is Nothing Wrong

She held on to him. Every few moments or so, his hand felt a gentle squeeze. The depth in this simple embrace contained everything worth living for. Initially signifying infatuation, it was a silent message that developed naturally into agape. Even sixty years later, in the cold, sterile hospital room, they were very much enamored.

He was brought back into that beautiful memory—the first time they admitted love. The sun was setting behind the tall evergreens and they were strolling back to the car, having enjoyed an early picnic supper in the park. Her beautiful green eyes, the scant freckles on her tan nose, and her auburn hair, mesmerized him. However, it was her laugh, her joy, and her generosity, that finalized his desire to completely surrender his heart. He was unable to keep it a secret any longer. He had to tell her. He stopped walking. Taking her hands into his, he looked directly at her. She was so beautiful. To his dismay, he had forgotten the poetic words so carefully chosen. Awkwardly, *“I love you,”* bumbled out of his mouth. Disappointed at his clumsy manner, he nervously awaited his fate. Her reaction was silent, but immediate. With sparkling eyes, a smile that made him melt, and a gentle pressure on both of his hands, she confirmed his heart’s desire. She reciprocated his affection.

He gazed upon her face now. She squeezed his hand again. How was it that she still made his soul soar? Her eyes were still green, but her freckles had long since faded. Her hair now white, with splashes of grey beautifully complimented her deep wrinkles. Even her walk had become slower; her gait showed pain. In fact, the doctors professed that she would never fully recover from that fall. Yet, she still glowed radiantly. Her beauty was the kind that emanated from her interior. Its extension outward greatly enhanced her natural physical qualities. It was pulchritude molded from suffering. Fidelity, fortitude, and benevolence, permanently adorned her. He was astounded at all that she was.

What would he have done, more importantly, what would he have been without her?

There was a time in their marriage when he wanted to call it quits. That eleventh year together was filled with intense pain. He had no longer felt anything for her. Veritably he thought her to be ugly, boring, and in many ways, stupid. The memories were still vivid. Anger and vulgarities had poured forth from him.

Tears filled his eyes. He shuddered at the recollection—at the man he once was. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to relive that dark period.

“It is time to leave her.”

He didn’t think he was a bad person. Yes, he had faults and he knew that he shouldn’t have said those things to her. But she shouldn’t have made him angry. The problems in the marriage were because of her: her intellect, personality, everything. Academia, publications, conferences, and consulting were all part of his world. As a mere housewife, she didn’t fit into it anymore. They had nothing in common.

Once, they had dreamed of having a large family, but that... A shudder went through his whole body. Within the last eight years, their two daughters were miscarried; their beautiful baby boy was born prematurely—not surviving more than a few hours. At first, in grief, they drew closer, but slowly the relationship deteriorated.

Emotionally clocked out, he finally took his ring off; it was time that his hand reflected his heart. Howbeit, the look on her face when she noticed still greatly disturbed him. It was one of the rare moments when she didn’t respond with a tirade. Her response, that forlorn expression, reminded him of the times his heart was equally broken. He blinked away the tears. He didn’t want to focus on the family that he was robbed of.

Within six months they would both be completely free, maybe, even sooner. Just last week, he started the divorce process. Maybe, in a couple more days, he would approach her about the word. Wishing that things could be different, he knew nothing he could do would fix her.

"It is time to leave her," he repeated more to himself than his grandfather.

Gramp's suggestion pierced his soul, "Son, you ought to treat her like a queen. Act as if there is nothing wrong with her."

"Haven't you been listening to me? She's an emotional wreck. It'll just make her worse." He had stopped pacing. "Besides she has to prove to me that she is worthy of me staying. I don't think I should have to do anything for her."

"Love her unconditionally."

"Gramps, you are being unrealistic."

"You want her to respect your headship, right?"

"Yes. But she's so headstrong and—"

"You aren't giving her anything to entrust herself to."

"What does that even mean?"

"Marriage is about service."

"Gramps, look—"

"No, you look. You need to lead in servitude. As the head of the household, you need to instigate the love and respect."

"That might have worked for you and Grams, but my marriage is over. It was over years ago. You haven't suffered the way we have." Sitting down, he continued, "I was a good husband. No, I am a good husband. She doesn't appreciate me. I can't change that! Uggggghhhh. Why prolong the inevitable? We are just not right for each other!"

"You will have more to regret if you walk away now. Believe me. She is willing to improve herself and your marriage. Take advantage of her desire to work things out."

"It's too late! She had plenty of chances!"

"To be WHAT? Perfect? Don't hold her to standards you are unwilling to meet yourself."

"You don't understand."

"I don't understand? Yes, you have suffered! But, you know what? Everybody suffers. Just because you... Look, you can't go wrong being faithful to the promises you made on your wedding day!!! Don't you remember? You committed to be faithful to her in better AND IN WORSE."

"Well, things have changed since I made that vow."

His grandfather simply looked at him. His eyes were sad. Turning away, he walked into the adjacent room.

"Graaamps! Oh, come on. AAHHHH!!!" He hit his fist on the table.

"Errr!" More gently, he hit the table again. He knew in his heart of heart, that his grandfather was right. But he had tried too many times. He endured his fair share of worse. Enough was enough.

He would still proceed with the divorce papers, and he would still make the down payment to secure that apartment. However, he would try a little bit. He didn't need his Gramps to be upset at him. In fact, he would record all the good that he did and all of her rejections. He would prove to the world that he was in the right. He would give this miserable marriage another month in which he would be really sweet to her, so as to help her receive and rationally process his announcement regarding their future.

Later that day, he walked into the most undesired place to be: their abode. She was vacuuming the living room. Immediately upon his entry, their eyes met. He recognized a flash of anger. Her body became visibly tense. She looked away. He wanted to forget his resolution.

Nevertheless, approaching her, he took one of her hands in his. All her motion ceased. This time, in her eyes, he recognized confusion. He squeezed her hand long and slow. He wanted to apologize, but the words wouldn't come. She said nothing. They were stuck looking at each other, neither willing to break the silence nor move. Finally, when her eyes stared to tear, he gave her a weak smile. Within seconds, he released her hand and was halfway down the stairs into his office.

She entered the basement. She brought him his favorite meal. Laid out before him was a root beer float, two halves of a toasted roast beef sandwich, a pickle, and chips. She disappeared almost instantly. He lifted up the top piece of bread. As usual, she had put too much mustard on it. He wondered if she did that on purpose.

That evening, as he sat on the couch reading a magazine, she hesitantly came near him. He pretended not to notice. Taking his free hand in hers, she snuggled up against him, and leaned her head on his upper arm. His heart quickened. She caressed his hand gently; he mechanically squeezed back. *"Maybe, she would go away soon."*

She whispered, *"I love you."*

He squeezed her hand again.

They sat together in silence for a long period. He purported to be engrossed in his reading, even to the point of freeing his hand. Turning unread pages was more important than interacting with her. When would she get it? She remained leaning against him, unaffected.

"Act as if there is nothing wrong with her." The words taunted him.

"Okay. Okay!" He mentally griped.

He grimaced. He glanced at her with as much stealth as possible. She was facing him, but her eyes were closed, her breathing was even. She seemed content to be near him.

"What did she want from him? What could he minimally give her?"

He stifled a sigh. He knew the answer.

Laying down the magazine, he shifted his body so that he could properly hold her. He pulled her close to him. She rested her head on his chest; he liked that. Immediately, she wrapped her arms around him tightly. He really hated when she clung: a physical manifestation of emotional disaster. This hug was a dumb idea. Like clockwork, she ruined every potential good moment. For him these embraces were limited, and would lessen in days to come. She would have to find someone else to cling to.

Yet, he was touched that she would miss him; as well she should. He wanted to leave her still yearning for him. He wanted her to realize in full what she had lost. He had loved her once.

He squelched another sigh. Her body was rigid. This embrace was just awkward.

Kissing her on the top of her head, he whispered, *"I'm not going anywhere."*

He felt a little bit bad leaving off the qualifying word, *"tonight."* Nevertheless, it did what he needed it to. Her whole body relaxed.

Over the next two days, he served her in little things. He asked about her day. He helped her do the dishes. He refrained from speaking when she didn't do things the way they needed to be done. He took her out on a date to a place she actually wanted to go—without her asking. He avoided conversations of contention. He even apologized for past failings. All of this was a huge struggle for him.

Nevertheless to his secret delight, she responded beautifully to these efforts. She smiled real smiles, and her clinging greatly decreased.

The experiment in servitude started to take a new turn over the next three weeks. He forgot about making a list for Gramps. Instead it became a personal challenge, a fixation. He was curious. If he surprised her, how would she respond? If he jumped up, and did something she asked immediately, what emotion would dance in her eyes? He started to look forward to figuring out how he could serve her better. How could he shock her today? As a researcher, he decided to utilize his professional talents. He found many creative ideas to test. He inadvertently put off talking about divorce.

He knew that the fun he was having would inevitably die soon. Per usual, this novelty would wear off as she became used to all the things that made him so wonderful. That's what had happened before. Instead of being joyful at his generosity, she greedily had demanded more of him than she deserved. They were both hurting, but she expected him to go above and beyond to help her heal. Her selfishness was why he had stopped unconditionally doing things for her. He had

hoped that constraining his gifts would have jarred contrition and gratitude. Instead, even more so, she turned into the woman of his nightmares. At least now, in his magnanimity, they both could part with some happy memories. He wasn't going to intentionally kill this amicable anomaly. He had waited for this interaction for a long time.

Additionally, he enjoyed the inner peace he discovered within himself. He went out drinking less, was able to concentrate at work better, and his nights were less restless.

One day, he returned to the house hours earlier than normal. She was in the kitchen baking. He snuck in and saw that her hands were elbow deep in flour and dough. Actually, the flour was everywhere. She was completely unaware of his presence. In her assumed solitude, she boldly hummed and sang to herself. It had been a long time since he had heard her melodic voice. A grin full of joy overtook his normally somber countenance. The love that was latent in his heart renewed itself briefly. She was so cute. He backed out of the kitchen undetected. Still beaming, he made his way to the bedroom. On the bed was an unwrapped gift for him. Next to it was a letter.

The first words written were copied from an Evelyn Waugh poem: *"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."* Underneath the quote, she detailed her appreciation for all the things he was doing for her; how much she loved him; how privileged she was to be his wife and some hopes for the future.

He sat there stunned. How was he going to tell her? He was enjoying these last few weeks, and he deeply wished they would perpetually endure, but he couldn't risk going back to the painful place that they had been in.

He was greatly disappointed. He wasn't planning on moving out tonight, and he didn't want to, but he was afraid that he was falling back in love. He had to fight this at all costs. Her gifts did mean a great deal. But to accept them, and then to abandon her would be wrong. As it was, he was doing everything in his power to minimize the inevitable pain his leaving would bring.

He grabbed his suitcases and began to empty out his drawers. The quicker he did this, the easier it would be. Anything that wasn't specifically his, he was going to let her keep. He glanced around the room one more time. There was one shelf, he hadn't checked. It was way in the back of their closet and hard to access. When was the last time he looked there? He had better check it.

There was only one item on it, a black sizable, but not deep box. Opening it, he discovered rolled up pages. He pulled them out. A sticky note fell off and onto the floor. He let it rest for now.

"What? She was going to divorce him? When was this dated?"

"Eight months ago."

"How dare she!?"

He shoved the pages back in the box. He bent down to look at what was scribbled on the scrap paper.

"I know it hurts, but treat him like a king. Act as if there is nothing wrong with him. Love unconditionally. In time things will improve."

He was in complete disbelief. For the first time in a long time he cried.

"The last year had been completely miserable for him. But she had no reason to leave him. Right?"

He needed answers. He went to her desk and pulled out the latest volume of her diary. Under normal circumstances, he never would have done this. She had been journaling as long as he had known her and he never violated her privacy.

The last entry was made a few days ago:

"I am so happy. I feel that he values me once again. It is a wonderful feeling. I am alive! I can't even express in words the cloud I am on. The way he now looks at me, and speaks to me; can it be that he loves me?"

"He still hasn't said those words."

"I want to do something for him."

He flipped to the first entry. It was dated seven months ago and had dried water splotches on it.

"I love him so much. I wish he could see it. I wish he would believe it. I don't know what to do anymore. Everything I do pushes him further and further away.

"He says that I am emotional, but I can't help it. How does he expect me to be as he rips my heart out? I am terrified at the distance between us. I just want him to be my friend, my lover, my protector. . . my husband. When did he become my accuser, judge, and executioner?"

"I long to tell him what is on my heart; as it is, I can't even tell him my basic needs, let alone my desires and my dreams. His negativity shatters all my hopes. He treats me as if I have no intellect, or even feelings.

"One kind look, one kind word would mean so much.

"But I am nothing in his eyes. To him I am broken. Everything I do annoys him. What do you give a man who wants nothing from you?"

"Freedom?"

"It'll be my death, but it might be my greatest act of love."

He read on to the next entry.

"I can't. I just can't. I pulled out the divorce application again. When I reread Gramp's words, I knew that I have to find some way... and I will. He may never love me again, but I will be faithful in 'the worse'. I promised. I'll try to make his life pleasant."

He flipped to another one.

"I don't know why he is always so angry with me. I think he blames me for our babies' deaths. I am afraid that he'll even leave me.

"Should I listen to my family and girlfriends and leave him first? They say that I am weak. They say I am allowing myself to be a victim to all of his emotional abuse. They insist that I need to liberate myself from needless suffering. That I have already endured too much.

"Should I deny all that is in my heart: the prodding to never abandon him?"

"No. I must be true.

"When I am, I am at peace. When I give in to selfish inclinations and refuse to serve him, the difference is night and day. I don't like who I am when I am unfaithful.

"I will love unconditionally. I must. I will respond to him as if he is already EVERYTHING I need him to be. I will do my best to not withhold any of my love out of disappointment or anger.

"Today at the luncheon, I resolve not to say anything negative about him. If, I must speak, it will be praise."

He closed the diary. He didn't need to read anymore. He put it back in its place. Tears were still strolling down his face. He stumbled around for the hidden wedding ring. In the moment of emotion, he put it back on his finger. He stared at it. He fingered it. He reread her most recent love letter. He didn't want to leave her.

"Creak." That must be her walking up the stairs. He quickly dried his face and turned so that she wouldn't be able to look at him directly.

"I didn't know you were home."

"Yeah. Sorry. I um, was able to get off early. You seemed busy in the kitchen. I didn't want to disturb you. I, um."

She nervously was eyeing the suitcases. Even in his peripheral vision he could tell that there was panic on her face. *"Are you going somewhere?"*

"I, uh."

She turned around and left.

He sat on the bed in agony for longer than an hour. He knew what needed to be done, but even he had to admit that he was a coward. *"Where did she find the strength to continue to try over and over?"*

Going through all her faults, he couldn't find any that justified his leaving. Every old excuse fell flat. She was not the one making the marriage miserable, it was all him. He was blaming her for insecurities in himself. It was a hard realization to swallow. He didn't know how to eat humble pie.

He heard the creak again. She leaned against the frame of the door. There was still some flour in her hair, but she had taken her apron off. Her whole demeanor was sad; the singing girl from before was dead.

"Are you planning on eating here?"

"Yes. It smells good."

"It's ready."

Following her downstairs, he wondered how he was going to fix all of this. He entered a candle lit room. On the dining table was a delectable feast.

"What's this? I thought you saw the suitcases."

"I did." She calmly sat down and placed a napkin on her lap.

"I thought you would be really upset."

"I am."

She avoided looking at him. He wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole. He was fighting back tears.

She continued with a shaky voice, *"I decided a while ago that my actions aren't going to be contingent on yours. I wanted to make you dinner."* She started fidgeting with her silverware, *"and, well, you saw my other gifts. I didn't do any of this as a bribe, or because I think you deserve it."* She looked up at him. *"I wanted to please you because I love you. Whether you leave or stay doesn't change this simple fact."*

Not having sat down yet, he approached her and knelt down. He drew her into himself and he clung to her. He kissed her forehead and then her lips. He held her for a long moment.

"I was going to go. I was planning to. I filed and I even have an apartment. But, I, I am not going anywhere...not now... not ever. Please forgive me. I—you know, how good these last weeks have been? Well, they are going to stay...I found that black box, and I read some of your diary. I am sorry. I shouldn't have. I also read your letter. It was...incredible. Thank you. Thank you, for choosing to love me unconditionally. I should have done that all along. If I had, things never would have...when things got tough, I closed my heart and I just blamed you. I was hurting so much. I felt that before I gave you any of my love, you would have to be perfect. And you weren't perfect. Over the years, my resentment grew and grew. I didn't realize... I became irrationally upset over so many nothings. I really hurt you, I am sorry. I— please say something."

She pulled back from him. Her adoring wet eyes met his equally tearful ones. Her smile and soft kiss erased many of his fears. She barely whispered, *"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."*

He clutched her hands, and pressed them to his lips in a gesture of renewed commitment. The heartfelt words, *"I love you,"* had never before flowed so freely and perfectly from his mouth.

"Beep.

"Beep.

"Beep."

The machine that he was hooked up to started sounding a frantic alarm. His breathing had become more labored. If it weren't for this and the IV, he probably would have forgotten he was dying. Last week, he had been admitted for heart trouble. There was little the doctors could do. He knew his time was coming. But he was lucky. Even now he recognized it.

In complete bliss, he lay there in his last moments gazing at her. She was so beautiful: her intellect, personality, everything.

So many of his family, friends and colleagues had already passed into eternity. How many of them had an angel at their deathbed? How many of them had such a loyal companion? Throughout the years, she had suffered so much for him. In the worse she was there, in the poorer she was

there, in the sicker, well, she was here. Many of his colleagues admitted in their dying months that they would trade their whole careers for what he had with her. Their honors, publications, trophy girlfriends, and big paychecks fell miserably in comparison to the joy they witnessed in his marriage. What he had was the envy of his world: everybody longed to love and be loved, but few wanted to sacrifice for it.

In all of his life, the moments that he treasured were the ones in which he denied himself for her. She was right. It was peace giving. The night that he decided to stay with her completely transformed him.

He still wondered how she could love him so deeply. She never held his dark moments against him. In the remaining forty-nine years of marriage, especially in the hard times, she never reminded him of the cad he was. She acted as if he were always her hero, as opposed to the man who had planned to break her heart. He tried to live up to her love. He hoped he succeeded. Trying is what made his life so worthwhile.

He caressed her hand for the final time. Loving her unconditionally was the best decision he ever made.