

## CROOKED LANE

“Did you take your medication Ben?” Asked Shirley Bailey, the afternoon attendant.

“I did. Why do you always ask me? I take the damn things every day.” Grumbled Ben.

“Just checking hon, don’t want you to miss it, are you going to come to dinner tonight?”

“No. All I want is a cup of tea and a slice of toast; with a little preserves, if you can manage it.”

“Okay Ben, I’ll stop by with it at 4:30, anything else.” She moved toward the door.

“Some peace and quiet.” But he smiled at her.

When she was gone Ben looked around his cloned room. It was typical of Crooked Lane Retirement Home with a generic desk and queen sized bed. There was a television in the corner opposite a garish recliner with a side table, and a bureau with a mirror against the wall. The floors were brown tile for easy cleanup and the walls were off white. He had a lot of photos on the walls though, mostly of his family. He and wife Ann had three children, and he was thankful for their attention now, especially since Ann had passed four years earlier.

On his bed was a multi-colored patterned quilt that Ann had made for him many years ago and it was his most cherished possession. At night lying in bed he often caressed his face with it and imagined it was Ann’s hand touching him.

He rubbed his arm and turned to the door.

Bruce Johnson was standing at the door to Ben’s room and knocking lightly on the jamb. He was older than Ben and had had a stroke so both his left arm and leg were atrophied and mostly useless. Bruce was wearing casual coveralls and squinting through his round glasses.

When Ben saw him he balked at first but then waved Bruce in. He knew Bruce would want to play checkers and Ben wasn't in the mood.

"Ben, hello", Bruce shuffled toward him. Bruce only smiled on the right side of his face. "How about a couple of games of checkers? There isn't anything to do until dinner, and Mrs. Stevens is playing the piano in the rec room. I wish she knew more than two tunes."

"Sorry Bruce, I'm just not in the mood for games this afternoon. Why don't we go and get a cup of coffee from the kitchen and sit down outside? It's a pleasant day and some fresh air would do us both good." Ben asked hopefully.

"No, I want to play checkers." He said as he spun his walker around and headed toward the door.

"Okay Bruce. I'll talk to you later." When Bruce was gone Ben rose and walked to the bureau between the bed and the TV. He stared at himself in the mirror; he was still a good looking man in spite of the age spots and wrinkles, but so what. He moved to the right and stared at several photos of Ann, she was always on his mind. He was in some of the photos, but he liked the ones of her alone the best. She had hated being photographed.

Some of them were Ann when she was young and he languished over her beauty for a while before moving on to later ones and then the ones taken before she died. In those Ann was still beautiful but she was wrinkled and gray, something he overlooked. In the last one of her even her eyes were gray and shallow.

He had loved her with all his heart even though at times they had had difficulties and arguments. He guessed it was normal but the troubled times had hurt him deeply, perhaps even more than they had Ann, he thought about it. They had both tried to change the other. Nagging about certain

habits and behavior. Cajoling one another and at times insisting for change, which now seemed very silly.

He still remembered the time during a heated argument she had shouted: "This marriage is just sex. That's all you care about!" But she was wrong. He had admitted to her that sex was a component of their relationship, but even then he knew it was something that was constantly evolving and changing. And that eventually when the sex waned and their relationship turned to a trusting mature union it would be an expression of their unconditional love.

Never the less, intermittently, for short periods of time their relationship and marriage was just like a contract, vying for parody. You treat me right and I'll treat you right. Everything had to be equal, and consequently everything was stiff and contrived. It had had to run its course, but for the duration of these stilted negotiations it seemed loveless and hopeless.

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He sat down outside with his cup of coffee and absentmindedly watched the birds for a while. There were only robins, jays, and sparrows flitting between the lawn and trees. He wished he had something to feed them. In fact, he wished he had something to eat. 'How long 'til the tea and toast?'

He thought again of Ann and sex, and wondered what she had been thinking the day she made that remark about their marriage. He accepted that when they were young he had sometimes forgotten about Ann in the urgency to release his own passion, but as the years had gone by he became aware of her particular needs and emotions and he had striven to please her. Eventually their love making had become natural. They trusted one another and allowed and accepted their desires and needs without conditions.

She had been a robust woman with handsome features that he adored. She was slightly shorter than he but she could hold her own when they jostled or wrestled; sometimes that had even been sexual between them, but mostly just physical, sensual, and fun.

He had admired every part of her body, even her feet; their lines and subtle aroma, and also most of the shoes she bought and wore. He, and she, had wondered if he had a foot fetish.

She was always a stylish dresser and took wonderful care of herself; and the children.

A fly landed on the back of his neck and when he slapped at it, he thought of the thousands of times he had nuzzled and kissed the nape of her neck, his chin resting on her collar. It had been sensual more than sexual, but he recognized that there was a sexual hint. Just as when they kissed, and even when they hugged.

As he thought about it he realized that in their relationship there was a sexual undercurrent that permeated everything. Dressing in the same room, shaving while she bathed, touching hands, and lying on each other in bed. He wondered about the times these acts had evolved into intercourse; and when they hadn't. He suddenly realized he hadn't considered that before and he began reviewing the intimacy of their relationship.

The first time they had held hands, the first time they kissed, the first time he touched one of her breasts, and the first time they made love; each had been erotic and sexual. There was a progression. An evolution as they learned to explore each other's bodies.

And hadn't that evolution continued throughout their lives? He wondered back to what their emotional and sexual feelings had been on different occasions; even when they conceived their children.

He loved his children dearly as she had, but other than the act of conception there was no sexual link to them. He was certain that for Ann there had been a sensual link, and pleasure. And when he reconsidered it he realized that there had been sensual pleasure for him as well. Holding an infant, smelling it, touching it.

He thought again about the development of sexual play and smiled when he thought of a young man ejaculating when he touched the hand of his girlfriend. Surely in earlier times that had occurred. Such extreme arousal being triggered by something considered so benign by the current standards. Foreplay was relative. Then he remembered stories of the Victorian era when it was scandalous to see a woman's legs. Sexual relationships evolved just as everything else did, and he wondered if natural selection had ever erred. Things were so frantic and shallow now, at least it seemed that way to him.

Now it was routine to see everything. And lovers unselfconsciously revealed themselves immediately, both physically and emotionally. He was familiar with what was called serial monogamy but he regretted that those who practiced it missed the fulfillment of a mature relationship.

He remembered vividly when he and Ann had first made love, each submerged in the liquid passion of the sex, but unable to find a unison, a togetherness. Each rising to the flurry of the moment, but alone. Consumed by the furious intensity, but separate in the act. How long had it taken before they had learned to make love as one? He couldn't remember; he cursed his failing memory.

When the joy of creating a family came. Their love making had changed again. Each act permeated with parental responsibility, as the possibility of a child, was suspended between their passion and love. When the later children had been conceived, Ann had known intuitively that she was pregnant. It was as if she could feel the sperm dancing with the ovum. Knowing as it transformed itself and her.

As the children were born routines evolved domestically but sexually as well. Sensuality expanded and fulfilled the closeness and love that they shared. Yes, they still had sexual intercourse but the act was always overshadowed by caution of discovery, and of course pregnancy. Sex became self-conscious and sometimes routine. Their love evolved again and manifested itself in casual contact, but with intimacy. The touch of their cheeks, the supple flavor of their lips, and for him the smell of Ann's hair. So many subtle encounters, sensual and loving, without insisting on more.

The children had been born one or two years apart and Ann was consumed with the task of mothering. She was often nursing a child or changing one's diapers when his hormones initiated insistent longings, but he had settled for a kiss and the scent of her and the infant.

He thought about the times he had delayed his gratification and concentrated on Ann's physical and emotional ascent. He had been satisfied on an emotional plane and never tired of pleasing her both sexually, and spiritually.

His mind probed for the habits and idiosyncrasies that had been such a large part of her character. Some were dim memories but most were vivid. He started to cry.

Why had an expression on her face, or the way she wrinkled her nose, or the way she touched her chest; and on and on, filled him with longing and love. Sometimes she would wink at him and his heart would skip a beat. Sometimes she would pat his face and it would seem to catch fire. He loved to caress her back, to explore her physical body; at first it had always been sexual. But their love making was not the only thing that was evolving so were their forms of intimacy.

He thought about every aspect of their life together and understood that the subtle changes had influenced every second. Everyone understood that life changed, but most, not that it changed on the most diminutive level. He had watched Ann apply her lipstick thousands of times, but the technique had

evolved. He had watched her dress but the routine had changed. He had watched her move a dinner fork from her right hand to her left hand and marveled at the subtle changes in the mechanics.

As the years passed the intimacy of their knowledge of one another grew greater and greater. There was awe in their subtle interactions. There was communication and knowledge that doesn't exist until a relationship has advanced.

There had been difficult times with the children, even an episode of drug experimentation, there had been broken hearts over infatuations, there had be disappointments and misunderstandings, but through them all they had remained loving and understanding parents. And working with their growing children in a uniform way had produced healthy, happy, well balanced kids. But perhaps more importantly Ben and Ann had grown too. They were aligned in their intent, were emotionally enriched by their children, and more and more bonded together.

When the children left home, thankfully all to pursue a college degree, Ben and Ann never experienced the 'empty nest' syndrome. They were in love and anticipating a more intense and fulfilling later life together. They were seldom sexual then, but they had matured enough that they were attaining the plane where they loved unconditionally. Their differences and idiosyncrasies were no longer a matter of contention. In fact they had learned to cherish the uniqueness of one another.

And then Ann had become very ill.

Ben stood and used his handkerchief to dry his eyes.

He had never anticipated that in the end he and Ann would love each other unconditionally. That a myriad of things that had once upset him, and he had learned to tolerate would all evolve into things that he cherished. He had even cherished her in her illness. He realized only time had

consummated the relationship and their love. He accepted that what they had had was a gift that only life together could bequeath.

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He thought of the many occasions when he and Ann had gone hiking around a nearby lake. The cliffs on one side were very high and you could see the entire lake from there. They often walked very close to the edge of the cliff so as to see it all.

One day he had stumbled over a small rock and it had rolled to the edge and fallen over the cliff.

He clearly remembered his thoughts from that day:

'The rock had been static. Poised perfectly in its surroundings, yet an infinity of possibilities existed for it and the world. His foot had started a journey for the rock as it cascaded over the cliff. Perhaps if it shattered or was caught in a tree on the way down it would have been realized in another way. But if it bounced off the cliff, influenced every time by the force of the bounce; and if it was fortunate enough to reach the lake. So many circumstances would have changed in its surroundings, and for the rock, it would have evolved. The shape of the rock might even be different, but if it made it to the water and splashed; forming ripples radiating into the lake, its essence would have been absorbed by the water and it would have surely settled to the bottom with wisdom.