

LETTING GO

A Short Story

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I don't remember my mother.

At least, I don't *think* I do. My memories are hand-me-downs. They really belong to my father. Stories he told me about the day they brought me home from the hospital, about her sewing my christening gown. Happy tales about a last chance pregnancy for an older couple, whom God finally rewarded with a child.

She was gone before I was two. "To Heaven," my dad said.

When I learned to read, I looked for the place on a map of Saskatchewan. I could find Swift Current, where we lived, White Star, and Paradise Hill. But no Heaven. How could a person get there without directions?

And now I find myself asking that question again, as I sit beside my father, waiting for the end.

There's something I should tell him. Something I think he needs to hear. But I'm a coward. I can't say the words—can't even think them without turning into a blubbing mess.

I prefer to relive the past, remembering how we'd run out to the backyard and dance in the first snowfall. How we'd watch Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein*, me closing my eyes tight, burying my face in Dad's broad chest when the monster appeared. How he taught me to ride a bike, running along behind me, holding on to the back fender so I wouldn't be afraid.

"Scaredy-cat," an inner voice taunts. I'm still frightened. I can't bring myself to say what I know I should.

I stay with him all day. Every day. My husband, Bill, arrives at the hospital after work and sits with me. He rubs the small swelling of my belly where our own child is growing. Then Bill holds my father's hand, smooths his hair away from his forehead, and talks to Dad in that kind, gentle way of his that fills my heart with a sweet ache.

When Bill leaves for the night, I retire to the corner chair, a scratchy yellow blanket wrapped around my shoulders, alert to every sound.

A plane passes overhead and I wonder where it's going. Europe? Australia? Mexico? My father always wanted to travel. He made it as far west as Medicine Hat. *Once*. Regina, about a dozen times.

There was never enough money for exotic trips. But always enough for *me*—new skates, pretty dresses, even dancing lessons. He'd sit at my mother's sewing machine for hours, stitching recital costumes, curses flying from his mouth—his big, strong, worker's hands fumbling with the delicate details.

Now, those hands lay limp at his sides.

Except when a nurse passes by the open door. He always has a little wave for them. Mr. Personality. But it's over quickly. He slumps back, that one, small gesture taking all

his strength.

I hear him stir. It must be two a.m. I don't need a watch to know. He usually gets anxious around this time. I lean forward, touch his shoulder and ask, "What is it, Dad?"

He looks at me, his sunken eyes bright. "Wouldn't a Dow go good now?"

I stare at him, confused. Then I realize what he's doing. He's trying to make me laugh by quoting the old slogan of a long-forgotten beer.

While I'm still chuckling, he slips his hand into mine. "Am I going to live?"

"I hope so," I tell him, still unable to let him go. "I need you, Dad." His eyes glaze with tears. One of mine falls onto the white sheet.

In a weak voice he asks, "Why me?"

His question leaves me tongue-tied, gut-knotted. "I don't know," I whisper, after a moment. But he's already drifted off.

He's tough, I tell myself. He'll make it. He bounced back from kidney stones, rheumatic fever, and a heart attack. He'll get through this, too. He has to. Because I can't imagine a world without him. Can't believe he won't live to see his grandchild.

Then a nurse comes into the room—the young, pretty one who's told me she's learning how to belly dance. "I'm off now till Thursday," she murmurs, patting my shoulder and offering me an extra blanket. "I doubt he'll be here when I get back."

I will his chest to rise. Pray that it won't—that his suffering will soon be over. For days, I've struggled, rehearsing my lines, knowing somehow he's waiting for my cue—waiting for me to release him, to say the words that will help him move on.

I gather my courage, rest my head next to his, and kiss his cheek. In his ear, I whisper, "You've been the best dad. I'd love you to stay with me, but if you have to go—you go. I'll be fine."

The next morning, just after nine, as a light rain taps against his hospital window, he lets out a sigh and leaves me.

I walk through the funeral in a blur. I can't eat, can't sleep. I should go back to work but I can't face the thought of everyone's awkward condolences. I have to put his house up for sale but the idea overwhelms me. He spent fifty years there. He's everywhere, keeping company with my memories.

I sit in his living room, the curtains drawn, and read his final will until I have it memorized. It's the little things he's noted that weigh on my chest—those possessions that were so important to him, he had to write them down.

He wants me to keep his retirement watch, with its peeling gold plate and busted springs. And a stopwatch that's permanently stopped. There's some sort of symbolism in that. But I don't want to think about it. All I can do is wonder at his last question.

Why me?

Why did such a great guy—a man who never hurt anyone—have to die like that? The thoughts run around my mind like a dog chasing its tail—constantly whirling, always covering the same ground, leading me down a dark path.

I should have done more for him. Should have done better.

I need to get out. Clear my head. I strap the retirement watch around my wrist and hang the stopwatch around my neck, wanting to feel both against my skin. I get in the car and go for a drive.

I switch on the radio and remember our road trips together. He liked the oldies—I *Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, or *Don't Cry for Me, Argentina*. He'd sing along,

off key, throwing in a yodel here and there, exasperating that serious teenager of so long ago.

I'd do anything to hear that voice again.

The road distorts like a funhouse mirror as tears bathe my eyes. I use my sleeve to mop them. Between the grieving and my overactive hormones, I'm a wet mess.

I'm at the Alberta border in no time. I should turn around. Go back.

I keep driving.

Another four hours and I'm in the mountains. Snowcapped. Beautiful. Even they make me cry. Because he never saw them. We'd talked about going on a family trip—Dad, me, Bill, and the new baby.

But it'll never happen. Not now.

I reach Banff as the sun is setting. When the darkness enfolds me, I panic. I shouldn't be here. I'm a wife. A soon-to-be parent. I have responsibilities. It's a little late in life for me to be running away from home.

I stop at a hotel and check in. The clerk asks how long I plan to stay. I have no real answer for her, so I make up one.

"I have some business in the area. I'm not sure how long it will take. A few days. Maybe a week."

She asks if I need someone to take up my luggage for me. Sheepishly, I tell her I have none. (A lot of baggage, perhaps, but no bags.) She gets me to sign a form and hands me a key. Through the labyrinth of halls, I find my room. I pick up the phone with numb fingers and call Bill.

His voice is higher than usual, his questions shoot across the phone line in rapid fire—"Are you alright where the hell are you when will you be home?"

I don't have an answer for *him*, either.

"I needed to drive. I didn't realize how far I'd gone until I was here." My excuses sound lame. Even to me.

"Okay." I hear the hurt in his voice—the terseness, the downward inflection. After a long pause, he adds, "But hurry home, love. I miss you."

I slide the receiver back in its cradle. Suddenly, the quiet of the room hurts my ears. The walls close in on me, tightening around my neck like the choke chain on a wayward pup.

I remember the clerk mentioning an outdoor hot tub. Too bad I didn't bother to pack—*anything*—so I don't have a bathing suit. And there's nowhere to buy one at this hour.

Then I think—who cares about modesty? I'm a stranger here, unlikely to return. I strip down to my bra and panties and grab the complimentary bathrobe from the top shelf of the closet.

I find the hot tub easily. All roads lead to Rome, all signs lead to hedonism. I see the steam before I see the tub, rising to the stars like ghosts kissing the night sky.

It's off-season so I'm alone. Except for one other person. A woman. A good ten years older than me.

"Hi," I say, to be polite, and ease myself into the bubbles.

"The water's not hot," she tells me.

I agree. Not what I'd expect from a hot tub, but perfect for the baby. I don't plan to stay in for long, regardless.

“You’re going to get your watches wet.”

“That’s okay,” I assure her. “They don’t work, anyway.”

The look she gives me has me thinking I should have lied—told her they were waterproof. Who wants to share a bath with a timepiece fetishist?

“You American?” she asks.

“Nope. Canadian.”

“You sound American.”

I shrug. Too many years of watching US sitcoms and reality shows.

“I’m here from Boston,” the woman says.

I smile, sucking back a tear. Another place my dad never saw.

“I heard the mountains were beautiful,” she tells me. “And they are. I thought coming here would help me think.”

I’ve come for the opposite reason. To avoid thinking.

The woman pulls her dark hair from her face. Her breath hits the cold air as she talks, forming little clouds. “A year ago, I had a great job. Bank Manager. Good money. I was walking down a ramp and tripped. Broke my foot.”

I make a sympathetic noise, not feeling sympathetic at all. What’s a broken foot? A healed one at that. I’ve just lost my father.

“They rushed me to the hospital. That’s when I found out. I have MS.”

People talk to me. I don’t know why. Maybe I have one of those faces. Maybe they’d talk to anyone given half the chance. I’ve heard about miscarriages, children’s drug charges and husbands’ infidelities. Confessions I wouldn’t share with my best friend let alone a stranger.

A guilty breath jams in my throat at this woman’s revelation. I shouldn’t have trivialized her ailment.

“I’m sorry,” I say, feebly.

She nods, continuing to bob her head as she speaks. “I worked all my life to get the things you’re supposed to have—a big house, nice cars, a summer cottage—the important stuff. When I couldn’t manage the job anymore, I lost it all.” She blinks, her damp lashes catching the light. “Even my husband.”

My chest tightens. I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing.

“We’d planned to send the kids on a trip to Europe next summer—a graduation gift. Now they won’t talk to me.”

“I’m sure they’ll come around,” I reply, automatically cradling my baby bump.

The woman pops a bubble with her thumb then lets her hand fall back below the surface, as if she lacks the will to keep it afloat. She stretches out in the water and closes her eyes. “Maybe. One day.”

I ease myself out of the tub and slip on my robe—warming my top half, while my feet dangle in the water. As the silence between us grows, I lean back too, supporting my weight on my arms. But I keep my eyes open and gaze up at the stars.

For a moment, it looks as if they’re falling, a slow, graceful dive into the tub. But it’s snow. I hold out my tongue and catch a flake, like Dad and I used to.

I think about those songs we played in the car, and it’s almost as if he’s singing them to me now—in that off-pitch way of his, jumbling up the words and the melodies to tease me.

I beg your pardon, but don’t cry for me, Argentina. A little rain’s bound to fall on

those roses of yours—a dribble, a drizzle, a deluge. Think you're the only one with wet flowers?

A tear rolls down my cheek and some of the heaviness I've been carrying trickles out with it.

Why me?

Why pain? Why suffering? Why heartache?

Because we're a forgetful bunch, always busy with the daily grind. We overlook the good things until we're confronted with the bad. *There but for the grace of God...*and all that jazz.

Life is how we measure it. And people have different currencies. Some are tangible. Others are carried in your heart. Like the woman beside me, I've been dwelling on what I've lost, not what I have. *Her* riches vanished in a moment. *Mine*, thankfully, remain—wonderful childhood memories, a caring husband, a baby on the way.

Wet roses? They'll dry. Meanwhile, I'll enjoy the rest of my garden.

I smile. This time, it's genuine. "Wouldn't a Dow go good now?"

The woman's brows raise, probably the way mine did when my father surprised me with the slogan.

"It's a beer," I tell her. "It's not around anymore. Defunct."

"Like me," she says.

I shake my head. "No. Not defunct. Starting over."

She lifts an imaginary glass into the misty air. "To new beginnings." She reaches for her towel. "Let's go get that beer."

"Milk for me," I say. "And then to bed early. I'm driving back home to Saskatchewan in the morning."

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LETTING GO is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locals, is entirely coincidental.

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