

# The Nightstand

---

Stepping inside, he closed the door and locked it. The end of the day had seemed like it would never arrive. The worst part had been the luncheon. How could anyone refer to it as a celebration, when someone you've loved forever is gone? Moreover, whose idea was it for a grieving spouse to host a gathering at the worst time of his life?

His wife of over forty years was dead. It had begun as just another ordinary day—she had backed out of their driveway, waved, and set off for work. He was confident, as always, that he would see her that evening at the dinner table, where they would discuss their day with each other. But in an instant the routine of their lives had ended; a truck changing lanes had forced her car off the highway and into a tree.

He knew when he got the call that it wasn't just a simple fender-bender. No, the police officer was tight-lipped; he wouldn't give any details other than to say, "We need you to come to the hospital, right now." As he drove, he wondered if it was a broken bone, or perhaps she was unconscious. *That's it . . . they need me to provide insurance information.* A couple of years earlier she had been involved in an accident when a driver behind her ran into her car at a stoplight. She was shaken, but unhurt. Her car had suffered the worst of it, a few thousand dollars worth of damage.

Nevertheless, they weren't getting any younger, broken bones took more time to heal. He wondered how long she might have to take off from work. At least he would be home to help her recover. Being retired gave him the freedom to either go to work or not. When he inquired

about his wife at the ER, he knew immediately something terrible had happened. He was led to a room down the hall, and moments later, a chaplain broke the news that she had died.

He couldn't remember how long he had stayed with her body, but a kind, compassionate nurse finally persuaded him to let her go. It didn't seem possible the accident could have killed her. She had some visible injuries to her face, but none of them seemed like they should have been fatal. Holding her hand while whispering to her, he couldn't accept the reality that she wasn't really there. *Wake up, honey, please . . .* When he finally left, he'd felt guilty, thinking he'd abandoned her, that she would be lonely there without him. After all, they had rarely spent any time apart. They had been each other's constant companion since their engagement so many years ago.

The next several days had been memorable in that he had no clue how he got through them. He knew he had made the burial arrangements, but that task was more mechanical than anything else. Ten years earlier, he had gone through the same exercise when their only child had been killed in the war. After his death, neither one of them thought their lives could ever be joyful again. But the more they turned to each other for strength, the more the stabbing pain in their souls became a less painful ache. They commiserated that at least they still had each other. And even though there would never be any grandbabies running around, they were thankful that, at least for awhile, they had been able to enjoy a child who had given them wonderful memories and had died a hero.

The house was dark; he had no intention of turning on any lights, for it was no longer a home. If he couldn't see her, he had no desire, nor any need, to see anything. He trudged up the stairs to their bedroom. Walking into the closet, he stumbled over her slippers. It had been their little

joke. He had always told her she needed to set them aside so he wouldn't trip over them; she'd always replied it was her way of knowing where he was. He didn't move them then; he didn't move them now.

He undressed and crawled into bed. Their nightly ritual had been watching the news before they fell asleep. Tonight, there would be no newscast; nothing in the world held any meaning.

Turning onto his side, he grabbed her pillow, inhaling her scent and lovingly pulling it gently to his body. He held it as if he were holding her, and at that moment the enormity of it all struck him like a metal mallet, shattering his controlled façade into a million pieces. His body rocked in pain, anger, resentment, and remorse. As wave after wave of tears and gut-wrenching sobs contorted his supine form, he cried out—"Why?"—over and over again.

Then the memories flashed, non-stop, flickering like an old movie reel. Their younger years, the difficult times, the baby, the school years, sending him off to war, and having him come home—in a box. The hurt they endured . . . together. The partnership, the two of them, her, and him, always victorious, a pair, a couple . . . lovers, friends, two becoming one to overcome. Now all that once was, was no more.

He'd always fancied himself the stronger of the two. Truth be known, it was she who was the secret ingredient that allowed their dreams to come true. She possessed the power to enable them to endure the adversity and challenges. He had the *physical* power, after all, he was a man, but it had little impact compared to her emotional strength. Without her by his side, he had as much chance of surviving as a sandcastle on the beach as the surf engulfs it.

No future, no past, only darkness. He dozed, but awoke shortly with a start, as he rolled onto her side only to find it full of nothing. His tears began anew, the despair—crushing, suffocating, and

relentless. A sliver of moonlight sliced a slit through the bedroom drapes, like a spotlight seeking an actor on a Broadway stage. He turned to the nightstand and saw the highlighted object—an almost full bottle of sleeping pills.