

Hope Haven

By M. Laurel Walsh

I never expected to spend the third anniversary of Arthur and Anna's death working at a garage sale. I had intended to spend the morning in bed, possibly the afternoon as well. A pale blue tablet insured a full night's sleep after a long day of rest; I had covered all my bases. Instead, by the end of that day, I sold four pairs of earrings, a coat rack, an ugly brown couch, a box of socks, a toupee (used), three silk slippers, eight pairs of shoes, fourteen hardcover books and discovered a dead body.

I'm getting ahead of myself. May 27th is a day that I dread. It used to be a day on the calendar, a forgettable mild-mannered day until my husband and three-year-old daughter were killed in a hit and run accident. Loss burned the date into my heart with a branding iron. I start thinking about how I am going to deal with May 27th on May 28th, immediately the next year looms. Holidays are hurdles but nothing presents the obstacle that May 27th does.

The first May 27th, I ran away, went to a cabin up in Brainerd and hid from everyone. Last May 27th, I lay in bed and wept. That had worked well and I was looking forward to my third anniversary prone. It was not to be. The first thing that morning, while my mother was finishing setting up for her garage sale, our chocolate lab bolted out the door and into the road and was hit by a car (what is it about May 27th that turns cars into killers?) Clutching her bleeding whimpering pet, my mother rang me, weeping and begged me to come man her sale, I could not say no.

If the tables had all been in the garage when I arrived, I would have shut the door, locked up and left but with fierce determination, Mom had dragged things out on the lawn. There was a sofa, lamps and bookshelves lined with books. She'd made signs that read, "Books—10c soft cover, 25c hard". She had a banner that announced in bold red letters, "MAKE AN OFFER". It was too intense to deconstruct. I put on her apron, heavy with change, and sat down in the watery spring sunshine to wait for customers.

The first car to pull up was full of handsome young college boys. Mom lives blocks away from St. Theresa's and there is a frat house two doors down. Even outside, I could smell the manly aftershave-masked scent of last night's party wafting from their clothes. I watched them take turns bouncing on the couch. In lieu of showers, each boy had donned a different colored baseball cap. If it weren't for the color-coded headwear, I would not have been able to tell them apart.

"Dude, the couch is comfy," said yellow hat.

"Dude, it's ugly," replied blue hat but he sat down.

"Fifty bucks?" Red hat sounded outraged.

"Check it out, you could totally sleep on it." Yellow hat was sold on the couch, brown corduroy and all.

White hat held up a lacy peach colored slip and did a little twirl, "I need to own this."

Yellow hat gestured to the bookshelf, "Twenty-five cents hard, get it, hard, that's cheap." Lots of guffaws and a slightly shamefaced glance in my direction, I feigned deep appreciation for my Reader's Digest circa 1985.

"Excuse me, would you take twenty-five dollars for this couch?"

The couch had been my father's. My mother second greatest pleasure after kicking my dad out last Christmas has been selling all of his things that he has purposefully neglected to collect. I think my mom would have paid someone twenty-five bucks to get the couch out of her sight.

I put on my pained, I'm-getting-ripped-off-but-I'm-dumb expression and said, "How about thirty? It's in great condition." We settled on \$27.50 and they went off to borrow a truck.

A forlorn, middle-aged book lover came next and had to borrow a grocery bag to carry all of her purchases while still riding her ten-speed. Mom called to tell me that Bogie (a lab named after Humphrey Bogart) was going to recover but would need a bevy of stitches and she wanted to stay and hold his paw. I was beginning to enjoy the distracting effect of the sale and only made two deep sighs in reply.

My dad rolled up around noon.

"Hey, kid," His big sad brown eyes looked up at the house. "Your mom around?" My dad looks like the ex-high school football star that he is. His blond hair is gone except for a memorial ring right above his collar. He still has that squared jaw and self-assured stance that only comes to men who could have had their pick of cheerleaders forty years before. When I was little, he'd been a football coach. When he met her, my mom had been the school librarian. She now was the assistant principal at St. Agnes' School for Girls.

"No, Mom's gone." I was irritated with him; it was typical that he didn't remember what day it was for me. "Bogie got hit by a car. She's at the vet."

“Is he going to be okay?” Bogie was his dog, used to fetch his newspaper, used to eat the butt end of his hot dogs and chew his slippers. Dad looked truly concerned. I patted his arm.

“He’ll be fine. They are stitching him up. He’s going to need one of those attractive cone collars.” Dad smiled. He didn’t do that much since he moved into the apartment above his used car lot. Then his eye caught something.

“Hey, those are my spare glasses!” Outraged, he put them on over his regular glasses and then shoved the second pair up on his head. “There’s my harmonica, that thing’s worth money.” I had to conceal a smile. Dad figured if all of his stuff was still in Mom’s house, eventually, he’d be back too. The yard was full of his little ‘anchors’ as Mom called them. He put the harmonica in his back pocket and the glasses got tucked into the collar of his shirt. Thank God they’d hauled the couch away, he would have probably tried to lie on it and prevent the purchase.

“Dad, she’s told you twenty times to come over here and get this stuff.” I continued flipping through my vintage digest. It came in handy in avoiding eye contact.

“Hell, it’s only been a few weeks, you’d think she’d give me a little...” he was sputtering, “break or something.”

Maybe on a different day, I would have been kind. In fact, that whole past four months since she’d told him to leave, I’d let him cry and had been sympathetic. It was the worst day of my year. I had to say what was on my mind.

“Dad, you act like Mom cheated on you and not the other way around.” He looked up like a child caught in a lie.

“Terry, for God’s sake, don’t you think I know I made a mistake? In thirty years of marriage, I never once so much as thought of another woman and then this, this, this...” Dad’s face was red. “mistake! An error in judgment that I am going to have to pay for the rest of eternity!”

There are times when I miss Arthur more than words. Arthur would know just what to do. He would sling an arm around my dad’s shoulder, call him “Pops” and let Dad feel bad about what he’d done. Arthur was a man with whom other men let down their guard. Arthur wasn’t macho; he wasn’t a bully, and so men didn’t feel like they had to be either. I couldn’t make Dad feel better. I’d seen the pain his so-called ‘mistake’ had caused my mother and as a woman and a wife (former), I understood her side clearly and his almost not at all.

An old woman clutching a coat rack interrupted us. I took her seven dollars (it was marked ten and she said she wouldn’t pay more than five for it but she was wrong). Dad sat on his old filing cabinet and looked at most of the things that had been in his office. “Does she ever talk about me?”

I was reading about the healing power of vitamins. “She swears about you occasionally but doesn’t really talk about you.”

“God, I miss Arthur.” Dad said putting his face in his hands. That is the thing about life. The day when you need the most hugs, you seem to find yourself giving them out. My father’s arched back, his harmonica sticking out of his jeans, his wedding ring glinting in the sun all compelled me to embrace him.

“I miss him too, Dad,” more than words, more than light, more than air.

An older man ambled up with my dad's toupee. "It's not marked." He said, flipping it over and looking for a price. Dad turned away to avoid another man seeing his tears.

"I think that is five dollars," I said guessing. Dad's head swiveled.

"That thing's made from real hair. I paid a hell of a lot for that."

The gentleman stared at Dad's bald patch.

"Why are you selling it then?"

I could see my father struggle with his desire to snatch the furry object from the man's hands. My mother had ridiculed my father's 'rug'. She likes bald men. Plus, my dad kept itching under it when he first got it and it reminded Mom of autopsy photos.

"I'm not." Dad proclaimed. The man glanced at me and I held up five fingers. He handed over the five without haggling and looked rather pleased with himself.

Mother arrived carrying Bogie. Dad immediately rose to help and she let him. Sometimes she forgets that he flushed thirty years of marriage down the toilet. They brought Bogie inside and I yelled to them that I was leaving. I untied the apron and placed it just inside the screen door and I got as far as the back gate before Arthur's best friend, Guy, stopped me.

"Terry, I've been looking for you everywhere." Guy is like the father you don't need. He keeps tabs on me. "Thank God, I found you. Now, you know I'd never ask you to do anything today if it were not of the utmost importance." Guy's gaze was serious and full of concern. All of Arthur's friends were people my mother would consider 'hippies'. She didn't like Arthur when she first met him because of his long

hair. Years later she conceded, “At least those people don’t just sit around and talk about how the world should be a better place. At least those people do something.”

Guy ran Hope Haven, a transitional residence that housed individuals who were moving from psychiatric hospitals back into society along with other renters. The idea was that before you move fully back into society, you should start at first base. The community residents were offered affordable rent and the psychiatric patients were subsidized by the state. Arthur had help raise the money to build the units and painted there every Sunday for two years. Even though I thought Hope Haven was an excellent idea, I never thought I’d live there.

“When I asked you to move in last year, it was not for occasions like this one but I really need your help.” Guy has a way of asking a favor that makes you feel like you are a Lord bestowing a gift. My bed was calling me but his little sheep-like countenance was irresistible.

“What is it?” My impatience was clear but Guy always heard the ‘yes’ not the ‘even though I don’t want to’.

Hooking his muscular arm through mine, he started walking the four blocks back towards Hope Haven. “Do you remember Rachel Quinn? You might not have met her, she’s up on the third floor.” Part of the agreement at H H is that you do not know which individuals are ‘in transition’ and which are not. I wanted to ask Guy but knew he’d never divulge that information. “Regardless, she is just a lovely woman, absolutely lovely, an accountant, very efficient, very attentive to detail and so it surprised me to realize that she had not paid rent.” Guy whispered the word ‘rent’. When Arthur used to imitate Guy, he’d whisper the word ‘sex’.

“Isn’t there a form letter that you send out when someone doesn’t pay rent?” I was trying to see what the hell this could possibly have to do with me.

Guy pulled me closer; I could smell his tangy, almost citrus cologne. None of Arthur’s friends believed in deodorant except Guy who also believed in silk shirts and shaving. Arthur used to say that it was all a big conspiracy; corporations were manipulating us to believe that somehow flowers smelled nicer than armpits. Guy would roll his eyes and pick a fleck of dust off his immaculate trousers. “Well, I do have that form and I did send it off, even put a little personal hello sort of on the note, there at the end and it is really a well-phrased note, not bossy, not threatening, kind of a pleasant reminder that we are part of a vital and special experiment, one that requires a spirit of community and a heart that gives.”

“We are talking rent here, it isn’t a donation.”

“Oh, Terry, don’t be so pragmatic. It is rent and it is also chipping into the communal pot. Part of the rent goes directly to the food bank, you know.” We lost a lot of potential community non-transitional applicants who did not want to live in the same building as a food shelf.

“Regardless, you have not heard from her since you sent it?”

Guy’s eyes widened in genuine shock, “Can you believe it?”

I could. We were approaching Hope Haven and I was experiencing the same sense of pride that I did every single time I walked towards the building. Originally, the mansion had belonged to the railroad baron, R. C. Mason. He was into the castle motif and each corner of his massive home had turrets. As we walked the flower-lined path, three stories of fieldstone with large windows loomed over us. The house was set back

from the street and the land behind was woods and walking trails. The yard was landscaped and purple, pink and white impatiens spilled out of window boxes. To the left of the house, right out my kitchen window was small fruit arbor with a clunky white gazebo in the center that always reminded me of that scene from *The Sound of Music* where she sings about being sixteen going on seventeen. Guy noticed my pleasure on seeing Hope Haven and squeezed my arm.

“Do you mind going up to Rachel’s room with me? I just think that the presence of a woman will diffuse the situation.”

I tried to imagine a less threatening man than Guy but drew a blank. This was an accountant we were discussing, not a linebacker. Guy opened the door for me and I moved ahead of him and up.

Later, I would think about the flies that buzzed out when we opened the door. At the time, I just thought spring plus fruit trees but later, they seemed to present a warning that decay was ahead. I remember glancing down the hall towards my cozy room. I was on the first floor and rarely ventured anywhere else in the building. I never used the laundry room and instead hauled a bag the short distance to Mom’s.

The flies in the hall set off no alarms for me and the air grew warmer and more still as we ascended. I was thinking about my bed, about my quilt, I was not really thinking about Rachel Quinn at all when we got to her door. I knocked softly and we waited. Nothing.

Then I knocked a staccato little rap. Silence.

I turned to Guy. “She’s not here.”

“Then, I have to check on her.” His blond hair was slightly ruffled and I could see why so many of my girlfriends had wanted to smooth it for him. His green eyes were flecked with specks of blue and gold. They were filled with authentic concern.

I offered my trademarked sigh and moved aside so that he could put the key in the door. I saw now that Guy wanted to cover his bases in case he caught her showering or pulling on a pair of nylons. Instead, the door opened and both of us looked at each other. The weirdest thing was that there was no smell, not right away but there was the unmistakable feeling of death that felt like a bony, cold finger had traced my spine.

I still can't recall why I walked in first. I think that I was still thinking about her dignity and the fact that she might be naked or exposed in some way and that I didn't want Guy to have to deal with that. By the time I got in the living room and then looked in towards the bedroom and saw her legs, I was aware that I was trampling on what might be a crime scene.

“Call 911.” I was completely calm.

Guy moved towards the phone.

“Downstairs.” The whole world felt like it had slowed down. There was no air in the apartment, complete stillness and that horrible feeling of finality. I could not tear my eyes away from her legs lying so still in the bed. I kept staring at the cool comforting shadows in there with all the shades drawn, the perfect setting for an afternoon snooze. Against my better judgment, I crept forward and peeked around to see her face. I immediately wished that I hadn't. Flies were buzzing around her mouth and nose and covered both eyes. Her hands were clasped over her chest in a funerary pose. She looked for all the world like she'd just laid down for a nap and then never woke up. The

bed was made, her slippers were parked at the foot of the bed, and all of her clothes were on hangers. On the table in the kitchen stood an empty glass and a solitary sheet of paper.

A better person, a person with deep convictions and a moral center of steel would not have read the suicide note of a woman whom they had never met. A better, nicer, kinder more thoughtful person would have recognized that there was an intimacy that a suicide note implies that does not include strangers like themselves. I am not nice. I am too damn curious for my own good. I knew that the police would be there any minute and I had to look. I walked to the note and leaned over so as not to disturb anything on the table. It was a simple sentence but it struck me to my center. In black block letters on a lined sheet of notebook paper Rachel Quinn had written the words, “IT’S JUST TOO HARD”.

I left then, just moved out the door to wait in the hall. Guy returned with Eddie Cochran, a buddy of mine from school who grew up to be a cop just like he always said he would. “Hey, Ed,” I waved.

“Did you touch anything?” Ed asked sternly.

“Of course not.” I hadn’t.

When I got back to my apartment, I expected to be absolutely exhausted to the core but I was filled instead with a restless energy. I made myself some food and then picked up the flat. Before I knew it, I was mopping. Then I dusted and by the time I climbed into bed, I realized that I hadn’t cried once the whole day. Just as sleep grabbed me, my last wakeful thought was, “What was *so* hard?”