

Survived By Her Husband Of Fifty- Six Years

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Ronald Fitzgerald lowered himself, slowly, toward the cushioned seat of his recliner. With a few inches left to go, he let himself fall. He settled in, then reached to the lamp table beside him and picked up the *"Local And Classified"* section of the newspaper, folded open, as it had been for the past nineteen days, to Liddy's obituary.

Lord, he thought, look what my thumbs have done.

From so much time spent looking at the same page, holding the paper the same way, his thumbs had worn away broad crescents of words in the obituaries that occupied the left and right hand edges, the facts of those other lives erased by his grief over the only life that mattered to him. He looked on the other side of the folded paper, and there too his fingers had erased ink, leaving roughened white spaces in ads for a Toyota dealer and a chiropractor. Allan and Cora, his son and daughter, had thought it ridiculous when he'd bought half a dozen copies of the paper the day Liddy's obituary appeared, but now he was glad he'd done it. The five extra copies sat piled on the coffee table, waiting.

He looked at Liddy's picture, pleased again that he and the kids had chosen to use a photo from long ago. He and Liddy had been slow and wrinkled together for so long he'd almost forgotten they'd once been much younger people, smooth-fleshed people, brazen with life. But there she was, smiling at him, young and pretty, years removed from the time-ravaged faces around her on the page, faces with the bones surfacing through pale, shrinking skin, the skull trumping the flesh.

He dropped his head back, the chair warm and snug around him, embracing him. That too reminded him of Liddy, of holding her, his arms wrapped around her strong back and shoulders, her wide, soft breasts pressed against his heart, the full, ample warmth of her flowing into him, a pleasure and renewal every time he felt it.

Soft and warm she'd certainly been, yes. But not unflinching. Not the day he'd sprained his ankle tossing the football around with Allan.

"Uh-oh," Liddy said, when he hobbled into the



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kitchen, heading for the ice packs in the freezer. "Does it hurt?"

"Twisted it a little," he said. "Nothing serious."

"I can see it hurts by the look on your face, Ronald. You're a man, not a stone. If it hurts, why won't you just say so?"

"Okay, Liddy – yes, it hurts. It hurts like hell, goddamn it. You happy now?"

"I'm delighted," she said. "You, in terrible pain – and confessing to it. Imagine!"

"Imagine that chair over here, please, so I can strap on this ice pack."

"Here. Sit down. I'll strap it on for you. I'm sorry it hurts. But you know what?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

"I love you more than ever now, you big dope."

That was her, and that was what she'd done for him time and again, harrying the nonsense out of him, prodding him and freeing him.

"I love you more than ever now." She'd said that, but that would have been impossible, because every day she'd loved him more than any man had a right to expect. Throughout their life together she'd called him "the sweetest man on two legs," even on into old age, when he knew full well he was anything but sweet to look at, with his belly fat, thin hair and flaky scalp, his muscles sagging, slack as pudding.

He pushed on the arms of the recliner, his torso dropping backwards as his legs rose. He drew a slow, deep breath and slowly let it go. He felt like he could fall asleep easily, but why? Other than replacing the socket on the lamp that sat on the table beside him, he'd hardly lifted a finger all day. It would be foolish, dangerous even, to fall asleep; it was too late in the afternoon for a nap. If he slept now he'd be up half the night, and that would derail the sensible habits he'd maintained so far. He couldn't let himself fall into the topsy-turvy, time out of joint routine so many older people adopted, or the eccentric behaviors, the odd mix of self-neglect and self-indulgence. If he let that happen Allan and Cora would be all over him, pestering him to move in with Cora, as they'd urged him to do after Liddy's memorial service. Allan lived far away, in a suburb of Dallas, but Cora lived just a few miles across town with her husband, Sean, and their two teenagers, Ian and Molly.

"We have plenty of room for you, Daddy," Cora had said. Sweet Cora, so beautiful, so like her mother, with Liddy's large, strong hands and long limbs, big brown eyes, thick, black, unruly hair.

"This is my home, honey," he told her. "I've lived here for forty-two years."

"Dad, it's a no-brainer," Allan said. "You sell this place. You drop the cash in your retirement. You live with Cora and Sean. You won't have a care in the world."

He hadn't seen Allan for over a year, and he was struck by how clearly Allan was becoming his father's son. Allan too had Liddy's soulful brown eyes, but he had his father's height and broad shoulders, his tendency to grow a bit thick around the middle, and his father's unfortunate inclination to pontificate.

"I miss your mother so much I can't begin to put it into words," Ronald said. "But beyond that, I don't have a care in the world now."

"Have you checked the eaves lately?" Allan said. "The paint's peeling. The back gutter's

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falling off.”

“With your mother ill I didn’t have time to take care of those things. But I will. I love this place, and I’m not going to hang around Cora’s house like a damn chair no one sits in.”

“I’m not sure I get that,” Allan said.

“Useless and in the way.”

Cora laughed and reached out and ran her hand lightly down his arm. “You can dust, Daddy. Wash the windows. Rebuild the porch steps. You won’t be useless.”

“A glorified handyman?” he said. “You’ll have to make me a better offer than that, kiddo.”

“You know what I mean,” Cora said. “You’ll have plenty to keep you busy. And you’ll be safer.”

“I have plenty to keep me busy right here, sweetheart. And for now I can still take care of myself.”

In the end, he’d held them off, but the kids would be watching him, looking for the slightest reason to take up the cause again. They loved and cared about him, and he appreciated the fact that they weren’t rushing to warehouse him somewhere out of sight with a bunch of strangers. Sooner or later, in all likelihood, he would become a burden to Cora and Sean. No reason not to put that day off as long as possible.

He looked down again at the obituary in his hands and read once more the phrase that for some reason lingered and echoed in his mind: *“Survived by Ronald, 78, her husband of fifty-six years.”*

He leaned his head back against the recliner cushion and repeated it, silently: “Survived by Ronald, her husband of fifty-six years.”

That’s me, he thought, and closed his eyes.

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Cora drove to the supermarket hoping she wasn’t too late to take advantage of the buy one, get one sale. Sometimes the most desirable products were sold out if you didn’t get to the sale early. She’d drawn a circle around eleven of the items listed in the sale flyer, items her family used all the time, especially the milk, bread, pasta and chips. She’d be able to stock up and save plenty, a small victory in the losing battle to feed two teenagers. Ian and Molly were both three-sport high school athletes, and they came home ravenous every evening and ransacked the fridge and cupboards like an invading army living off the land.

She was lucky the supermarket flyer had slipped out onto the floor when she tossed the newspaper in the recycling bin. Otherwise, she would have missed the sale completely, something that never could have happened when her mother was alive. Her mother would have called her, told her when the sale began and ended, then read off half the flyer, mentioning every product she thought Cora might be even remotely interested in. Her mother had sometimes driven her crazy, calling her like that two or three times a day, sometimes more, to tell her something, ask her something, remind her of something. Now, with her mother gone, Cora found herself more aware of the phone than ever, its new silence, some part of her brain always poised, waiting to hear it ring.

Cora wondered if she should stop and see her father after she finished shopping. She

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hadn't seen him for five days, hadn't talked to him on the phone for three, the longest stretch without touching base with him since her mother's memorial service. She tried not to worry about him, but his solitude nagged at her. He'd lived most of his adult life with her mother taking care of the everyday details of life, and she wasn't at all convinced he'd be able to fend for himself.

He'd been a good father to her. Not a perfect man, by any means. He could be obnoxious at times, overbearing, a know-it-all, and he was often a stiff upper lip sort of father, not one to coddle or cuddle you when you bumped your head or a bee stung you. She still laughed whenever she recalled the day she'd complained to her father that she wanted to go outside to play but it was raining. She must have been five or six years old at the time.

"It's very simple," he told her. "As soon as the rain stops you can go out."

She'd sat at the living room window, bored but hopeful, watching the rain come down, falling and falling as the long minutes of her young life ticked away. "It won't stop, Daddy," she said when her father came into the room.

"Well, isn't that odd," he said. "It always has in the past."

But he'd been patient and encouraging with her, too. He'd given her and Allan the gift of his time. Above all she'd loved the weekend hiking and camping trips he'd taken them on, expeditions her mother had no interest in. He'd taught her to open her eyes and notice things, and she'd reveled in those hours climbing trails in the wooded hills, fishing for trout, finding little caves to hide in, learning the insects, flowers and trees, coming home with the antlers, fossils, tortoise shells, bird's nests, snakeskins that decorated her room. He'd never failed to hug her and tell her how pretty she was at every moment that called for that, but he'd opened up her fighting side too, taught her to hit and throw a baseball so well she'd played Little League with the boys. He'd spent countless hours with her under the basketball hoop out on the driveway, teaching her to dribble and shoot, insisting she do both of those things equally well with both hands. In high school, although she hadn't been a star player, Cora had made the starting five her junior and senior years.

One February afternoon, when she was still a novice driver, Cora had been driving home from the high school with a car full of friends, the road snow-covered, the snow still falling. She and her friends were swaying side to side, singing along at the top of their lungs with a song on the CD player, when the car spun in a circle, went off the road, and smashed into a tree. No one was seriously hurt, but the car was undriveable, a front fender crumpled tight against the tire.

Cora had called her father with the bad news, rather than her mother. It wasn't her mother's anger she feared, because her mother was never an angry person. But her mother never let a teaching moment pass without taking full advantage of it. Right away, in the immediate aftermath of the accident, her mother would have been questioning her about the chain of events, then pointing out what Cora had done wrong, then lecturing her on the dangers and responsibilities of driving, exhausting circles of talk, talk, talk. With her mother, the dust never settled, but what Cora wanted after the accident, shaken and ashamed as she was, was someone to find shelter with, someone who'd stay calm and simply do what needed

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to be done. And that's what her father did. He came and picked her up, spoke to the police, made some calls and had the car towed to a Toyota dealer. Then he went home with Cora to act as a buffer when they told her mother what had happened.

On the drive home, Cora admitted she'd been goofing around rather than paying attention to her driving.

"So you learned a good lesson and got off cheap," her father said. "Didn't you?"

"I was an idiot, Daddy. I'm sorry."

Her father reached over and took her hand. "I'm just glad you're all right," he said. "I can replace the car. But not my daughter."

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When Ronald awoke, the day and the house had grown dark.

He rolled the recliner forward and sat up. Good god, how long had he slept? What time was it? His heart quickened in the slight panic of his confusion.

His heart – what was it about his heart? Ah, the appointment, yes. With the cardiologist. Dr. Henkel? Haskell? Wednesday or Thursday? Liddy would know.

Oh, for godsake, what am I thinking? No, Liddy won't know. Liddy can't help me now.

He turned the switch on the lamp beside him, but nothing happened. He must have brought it back up from the basement after changing the socket and forgotten to plug it in. He heaved himself out of the recliner and up on his feet but decided against trying to weave around the furniture to the lamp in the far corner. Holding his arms out in front of him, he made his way through the dark toward the kitchen, moving with small and tentative steps, annoyed by the timidity forced on him by his arthritic knees, his slight vertigo.

He kicked the leg of a dining room chair and stumbled, but grabbed the chair back and stayed on his feet. Then he oriented himself and understood the path he needed to follow when he saw from the kitchen a faint glow of digital light from the radio and the stove clock.

The clock said 7:37. Sixty-seven minutes past dinnertime. No wonder he was so hungry.

Since Liddy's death, and after friends with their casseroles of sympathy had returned to their own lives and sorrows, he'd been living on the soups Liddy had made and canned during her last summer, with her declining strength, using vegetables and herbs from her last garden. Her soup was the only food that tasted good to him, and so easy to manage. He knew a frying pan from a sauce pan, and he could toast bread, fry an egg, make a sandwich. But that was the extent of his culinary artistry. Thank god for Liddy's soups, such splendid soups, as spirited and hearty as Liddy herself: smoky split pea, thick tomato basil, lavish minestrone, satisfying food, an honest-to-god meal in a bowl. He couldn't talk to Liddy anymore, or touch her. But she was still caring for him.

What would he eat when her soup was gone? He seemed to recall some country singer or cowboy star named Slim Pickens. That's who he'd be when the soup ran out. Mr. Slim Pickens. He'd be eating a lot of fried eggs, no doubt. Egghead Fitzgerald. *Give us this day our daily egg.*

He decided on the minestrone, but remembered he'd used up every jar of soup in the kitchen cupboard. He'd have to bring up more from the shelves in the basement. He opened the door to the basement stairs and felt along the wall for the light switch, couldn't find it, and

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lowered his foot, feeling for the first step. But he overshot it slightly, landing on the front edge of the step with the back edge of his heel, and when his heel slipped off he pitched forward and plunged down the stairwell into the darkness.

The fall felt like a brief sort of flying, a rush of air rising around his face, and with it, in the moment between plunge and impact, came the instantaneous and primal fear, the understanding of what was happening to him. He thrust out his arms to soften the blow, but falling blind, in complete darkness, the impact caught him by surprise. His face smashed into one of the lower steps, the force of the blow borne by his upper jawbone, his teeth and lip just beneath his nose. His head snapped back, then twisted, pain flaring out through his neck and shoulders. His body swung sideways and he rolled, stiff as a log, to the foot of the stairs, where he came to rest face down on the concrete floor.

At first all he could feel was his heart, the force and speed of it, his chest throbbing against the concrete. He lay with his eyes closed, motionless, waiting until at last his heart began to ease up and slow down. Then he felt the blood – all around his tongue and teeth and on his lips. He opened his eyes, but might as well have left them closed, because he saw only darkness, no light of any kind there in the basement.

He understood what had happened. He'd fallen, fallen down the basement stairs. He'd been hungry, but now his head hurt. He'd rest a bit, then go back to the recliner.

The floor, the hard concrete, the coolness of it against his chest, coming through his shirt – he could feel all that. He tried to move his legs, tried to wiggle his toes, but couldn't seem to do it. Below his waist he felt numbish.

A good word, "numbish," a funny word. He wanted to smile, but his mouth felt huge and his whole face ached. He'd never heard that word before. As he always did when he learned a new word, he used it in a sentence: "*Ronald Fitzgerald is a numbish man.*" Liddy would like that word when he told it to her. She was so clever with words herself, loved playing with them. He needed to be careful, though. She latched on to things like that. She'd wind up calling him "Mr. Numbish" for weeks. And knowing her, she'd pronounce the "b" when she said it, just to be silly and drive him nuts.

His head hurt. Had he hit it on something? The recliner would be more pleasant, but he felt so numbish. And really, he was fine where he was, comfortable enough. He could stay there. He could even sleep there if he had to. He could sleep there forever, in fact. So cool and quiet and dark down there. He'd could sleep there like a Pharaoh, until he dwindled down to his bones. Slim Pickens.

He tried moving his arms, and discovered that he could. He reached out, searching for the wall, and found it. No moisture, no leaks. When he died, would the kids remember he'd served in the Navy? Would they put that in his obituary? Surely they would. He seemed to recall telling them his Navy stories.

Again he ran his hand over the wall. Solid and dry. He was perfectly safe, on a good ship, watertight. Ready to ride out any storm. He was safe, and someone would find him soon. Would the kids be home this evening? No, no, they were away at college. Allan a senior at Cornell, Cora a sophomore at Penn State. Or had Allan graduated already? How old were they

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now? Liddy would know. She'd have it all straight.

He licked blood off his lips. That Liddy – amazing woman. Far and away the most efficient, well-organized person he'd ever known. She knew the kids' work schedules, their lunch hours, how many miles they had on their cars. When they traveled she knew their flight numbers, their departure and arrival times going and returning. Always calling them, reminding them of a doctor's appointment they'd made or when they needed an oil change. Lord, how many times had they had the same conversation?

"Let them be, Liddy, for godsake. Let them run their own lives."

"They're my children, Ronald."

"They're grownups now."

"In the eyes of the world, yes. To me they're my children."

One Sunday morning he'd sat out on the porch drinking coffee with Cora, when she'd leaned close to him and spoken in a whisper so Liddy wouldn't hear: "Daddy, do you think you could get her to back off on her 'little reminder calls'? Does she think she raised a moron, or what?"

"I've tried, sweetheart, believe me. You're going to have to live with it. And try to be gracious about it."

"But it's so exasperating."

"I know. But it's love, too. Don't forget that."

His head hurt. He'd been accused more than once of being hardheaded, but Egghead Fitzgerald had cracked his egg. His cheekbone, pressed against the concrete, felt cold and swollen. The recliner would be so much better. But he was on a fine ship. Weather any storm. A headache, but otherwise so pleasantly numbish. Nothing to worry about, right where he was. Cool and dark and safe.

Yes, Liddy would know what the kids were up to. And if the kids didn't come, Liddy would find him. But she'd already be in bed by now. Sound asleep, probably. It would be morning before she found him. That would be fine. He could sleep there for the night. Or forever.

The phone rang up in the kitchen. That would wake Liddy up. She'd answer it and come looking for him if the call was for him. He closed his eyes and waited, but the phone kept ringing and ringing.

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Cora loaded her groceries in the back seat, then got in the car, took out her phone, and punched in her father's number to tell him she was going to stop by on her way home. Beyond her concern for his physical well-being, she simply wanted to see him, to stay close and connected to him during the time that remained to them. Walking around the supermarket, the thought had struck her that it wouldn't be long before she'd be a person whose parents were both dead, a person who was no longer anyone's child. Strange, thinking of yourself that way, an orphan except in memory. How could your parents be gone, those two unforgettable faces out of the thousands of faces that drifted past you and disappeared over the years? On one of those long ago hikes, she and Allan and her father had crossed a farmer's hayfield, the

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early spring grass still short, but thick and intensely green, acres of it spreading around them. On a little rise near the center of the field they'd sat down to rest on a cluster of dark granite boulders, rough and weathered and mapped with lichen. That's what parents were like; parents anchored the world for you, boulders in a sea of grass.

Cora let the phone ring ten, fifteen times, but her father didn't answer. He'd probably fallen asleep, keeping odd hours now, like so many elderly people. She wondered if maybe tonight she should just let him be. He hated being fussed over. Last time she'd stopped he'd been annoyed with her, had even accused her of being like her mother, "sticking your nose in everyone's business."

Still – it was strange, unlike him not to answer the phone. She closed her phone, started the car, and drove slowly across the parking lot. Even if he'd been sleeping, it didn't make sense. She'd heard him complain, loudly and often, about being a light sleeper.

When she pulled in the driveway, her father's car was there, but the house was completely dark. The kitchen door was locked. She rang the doorbell and waited. No response. She took out her key and let herself in.

She turned the overhead light on in the kitchen, saw the basement door standing open. At the top of the basement steps she drew a breath to call out for him. Then she saw him.

"Oh, my god." She flipped on the stairwell light and hurried down to him. "Daddy?"

"Liddy?" he said.

"No, Daddy, it's Cora. Oh, my god, you're bleeding."

"I cracked my egg, honey. I'm fine."

"No, you're not. Don't move. I'm calling for help."

She dialed 911, gave them the details, told them to please hurry.

"Liddy?"

"No, it's Cora." She placed her hand lightly on his back. "I'm right here next to you."

"Wake Mommy up, would you?"

"I wish I could, Daddy. Now I'm going to run up and turn on the outside lights, okay? Don't you move!"

Cora? Where was Liddy? Gone to bed? Oh, for godsake – what was wrong with his brain? No, not gone to bed. Much worse. Far, far worse. How could he have forgotten what his thumbs had done?

He wanted to see his newspaper, see Liddy's face again, read about her again, and about himself, that phrase, that strange phrase: "*Survived by Ronald, 78, her husband of fifty-six years.*"

That's me, he thought. Her husband, Ronald. Mr. Numbish. The sweetest man on two legs. Ronald, her husband. Surviving.