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THE LONG RIDE
By
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To reassure herself Pat told Sid to pack an energy bar and extra water as she watched her husband get ready for the ride, so healthy, so strong from all of the bike riding he had been doing even though there was a little accident now and then or an incident with a car that sometimes worried her.

“Why don’t you give it a try?” he asked. “I’ll let you lead.”

“No thanks, you go ahead,” she answered. There had been a time she would’ve joined him. Many times she had enjoyed bike rides they had gone on together.

Looking back on it, she remembered thinking, as she ushered him out the front door, that he should be back in a couple of hours given his strength and stamina and how fast he rode. Indeed, if she had known he suffered chest pains, she would’ve... She kept coming back to that; yet she knew she couldn’t have stopped him.

And now what? It was so unanticipated, Sid’s death. Pat sobbed, thinking about it. For the first time she was living in her big house without a man. It happened suddenly, a heart attack on the long bicycle ride she refused to go on. With no one else there and the summit in sight, he died. She knew the spot and remembered the view they loved from there, a view that extended for miles and miles on a typical day and would’ve seemed worth the effort to him.

To get out of bed; to do something, anything like eat? Not ready yet!

But what part of the loss affected her the most, and how did she respond? No one had seen her weeping, had seen the sobbing she couldn't control. The disillusionment, distancing, and detachment in her marriage had begun months, even years, before. But contrary to wanting to getting rid of the guy, she now couldn't move from room to room without escaping the sadness and the gloom. Anything and everything would set off her pining.

There were days when she wouldn't get up at all. Friends tried to pull her out of it. None of this unsolicited advice helped. Her grandchildren couldn't understand. Friends and family all made assumptions that weren't true. To her it didn't make any difference who was around and who came and went. She'd pretend she wasn't home. The life she had known had ended and everything had changed. Even her son treated her differently. And as he came around more often, his concern grew.

Things became harder and lonelier at night. Her depression was so deep that nothing helped her. Noise grated her nerves. She could see Sid wherever she went throughout the house, whenever she saw something of his, some shirt, some personal item. Each time she became angrier, angry at him and angry at herself.

It was in this state of mind that she had burned herself on the stove. Something, she remembered, she had said to Sid that really bothered her, something she had regretted the moment it left her mouth; hadn't taken it back; something tacky; something mean and damaging, like an untreated knife wound that wouldn't heal without special attention. "I'll wait," she remembered saying, "he doesn't deserve an apology just yet." Then it was too late.

So of all the horrors, Pat thought, this she had been the least prepared for: her world in one fatal stroke had shrunk to a big old house, without even a cat or a dog for a companion. In each room she had a clock that nagged her somewhat in the same way as her family and friends did. But she didn't want to move on just yet or face the world. It was just too soon, too soon to let go of her loss. "Go slow" and "don't venture out until you're ready," she told herself. As she lay there in bed, Pat thought of her son's anger over the heart attack. Her anger and anguish grew as she thought about that and everything, the attack that had completely consumed her, had completely incapacitated her, and had completely stunned her. It was as if she had been struck down instead of Sid.

So now what? What would she do? From her shattered life, catatonic, held in the grip of her grief, there erupted in her the pang of reality, at that very moment, in the late afternoon, that she should live, that she should get up. And as the fog in her mind coming from this sudden and unthinkable tragic event receded, scraps of unrealized dreams came back to her, surprising her now and then, and showing a slight hint of hope. Maybe she could become closer to her son, spend more time with grandchildren and friends, enjoy all of them more. Fragmented as they were, these dreams, as she discovered, had new meaning for her.

Sid should've told her about the chest pains, and she would've tried to stop him from going on such a long ride. Pat, however, didn't think it would've made a difference because by then they sat on opposite sides of a wall of silence.

That last morning they had read books through breakfast, all absorbed, he about God and the universe, she about crime and mystery. When they spoke, it was about the

news of the day. They had eaten their breakfast in a hurry, as they did every day, and brushed the crumbs of their toast off their matching shirts, using their napkins. When finished, they scraped back their chairs, and got up, speaking very briefly.

Now that staying in bed any longer was beginning to feel wrong for her, she looked at the time on her clock radio, recognizing the futility of hiding from the world. Nah; it wouldn't do her any good. Look at you now; she wanted to say to Sid. That's how it goes, the breaks, Sid would say. He would bring the conversation around to God and His will, Sid surely would. He was intolerably self-centered, thinking he had an inside track. (It infuriated Pat.) Worst of all, he was born again. But see! she said, thinking about him. Look what happened to you! She could see him sitting in the lap of God with a smug smile on his face, smugness she had frequently thought she felt from him because she didn't know Jesus on the same plane as he had. It had been a big difference. It was very private. Deep down inside, she knew, he had felt superior. His faith had been so apparent. He had prayed every day. All of this added up to a major conflict. But what had been a major conflict while Sid lived was now a source of sorrow for her.

Yet she could not really imagine where he had gone. He had been absorbed in his faith, but when she looked up at the ceiling (as she did now in her grief), it was not with the hope of seeing anything similar to what her husband saw. It was to try and orient herself.

There, in bed too long, she threw the covers back to salvage the rest of the day. She'd eat something, she thought, as if eating would revive her or motivate her to take

care of some business she had never had to take care of before, or push her on and on in ways that scared her.

As she started to get up...stop! She had to catch her breath...stop! After a few steps...okay, a few more. Suddenly, she felt pain in her chest! Stop! No! Shortness of breath...pressure! No, no, she wasn't going let herself be taken by it. Through the house she went, checking her pulse. No! But as she went on thinking she might be having a heart attack, fragments of her dreams emerged from the fog of her mind and countermanded the pain. No! She wouldn't allow it.

“I'm not going with you now!”