

A SEASON OF GRACE

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One

I've heard that death is part of life, something that should not surprise or frighten us. We are born. We marry. We have children. We die.

Of course this discussion generally occurs on the pages of the latest news magazine, or on talk shows between humans currently in the best of health. These sages seem to imply that death is to be anticipated with the same enthusiasm as a summer vacation or breakfast at Denny's. At one point in my life, with death at arm's length, their viewpoint made sense to me. But after what I've been through, frankly I'd rather order a Grand Slam and a glass of orange juice.

I certainly would never have chosen the path my life has have taken.

On the last Saturday of August, almost fifteen months ago, I left my snoring husband in bed and slipped downstairs to enjoy a few moments of peace before my real day began.

Certain that my teenagers would sleep late, I ate cold cereal alone in the quiet of a dewy summer daybreak. I remember the morning felt cool, but bright, and as I looked out my kitchen window, I felt a certain dread that the seasons had begun to change.

In spite of the deep green leaves on my sweet gum, I'd seen the clues. Nights didn't hold the heat anymore, and days had grown noticeably shorter. Just that week I'd sensed that the afternoon temperatures no longer rose to the usual summertime highs. We'd experienced a few mornings of dense fog, and though it burned off by noon, I could not ignore the implications. No matter how I resisted, summer would make her exit. Fall had her eye on Potter's Hollow, and she was well on her way.

Even though most women love the crisp air and brilliant colors of fall, I don't. I hate the gray skies and early darkness of short winter days. I get tired of being wet and cold all the time. I cope by looking forward to the shortest day of the year so that I can anticipate the coming of spring.

Though it sounds completely crazy, I survive Northwest winters by looking forward to looking forward.

Even though I was raised in the Northwest, I'd move to Hawaii in a heartbeat. I've always felt as though Maui might be my real destiny. As I put my cereal bowl in the dishwasher that morning, I considered begging my husband to consider retiring to a tropical island. No matter how many times he reminds me that perfection grows boring, I argue my position. After all, how hard could it be, living in paradise?

Sighing, I closed the dishwasher and headed for the laundry room.

On that August morning, I faced an enormous pile of laundry left over from our last outing on the Oregon coast. When I crawled out of bed, I'd promised myself that I would wash, fold, and put away every last stray sock, even if it killed me.

Confronting that pile of filthy clothes, I wondered if it might.

I'd invited my mother for dinner on Sunday in honor of her birthday, and I knew that if I didn't have my house in order, I'd never hear the end of it. At 82, Mother has no tolerance for a disorganized household. Actually, she's never had much tolerance for anything. Mom never misses a chance to chide me about my household neglect. I wondered what arrows she might launch in my direction if she saw my laundry room.

When I opened the lid of my washing machine, the smell of moldy linen assaulted me and I groaned aloud. I'd forgotten to put this load in the dryer. Holding my breath, I determined not to let this small obstacle set me back. I pulled out the sheets, touching them as little as possible, and dropped them in the dryer. The heat will kill the smell, I told myself, and added a second dryer sheet for good measure. With any luck at all, the scent of summer breeze would cover the stink of neglected mildew.

I sorted the dirty clothes into moderately sized mounds of darks and whites, mediums and reds, and stuffed the first load into the washer before escaping to the family room for a quiet moment with my new issue of Vogue Knitting. Relishing a few moments alone, I curled up in the corner of the sectional and sipped steaming coffee as I read.

In the middle of an article by Meg Swanson, the buzz of the dryer interrupted my concentration. I was reluctant to respond—I'd always wanted to know how to calculate the stitches for a round-yoked sweater.

Holding the magazine open at eye level, I staggered to the laundry room, still reading. I spread the pages across the dryer as I dropped dry sheets into a laundry basket. After emptying the washer I filled it with a load of sandy jeans, all the while considering the yarn in my stash, and wondering which I might use to experiment with the new technique.

Sliding the magazine up over the detergent container, I continued reading as I squeezed the button and filled the measuring cup in my other hand with liquid detergent. Just as I began the section about casting off the under-sleeve stitches, our doorbell rang.

I continued pouring detergent, mentally calculating the stitch formula along with Meg. The sensation of cold liquid seeping through the knee of my pant leg caught my attention. I glanced down. "Shoot," I said, with the enthusiasm of genuine cursing.

All this time, I'd been pouring detergent through a hole in the bottom of the cup—down onto my pants and slippers, over my pile of reds and onto the floor. By this time I'd poured long enough to create a pale pink puddle that oozed under the dryer.

I held my hand under the broken cup, trying to limit the damage, and dropped the whole thing into the washing machine. The doorbell rang again.

“Could someone please get the door?” I asked, raising my voice and exaggerating the words. Though I hadn’t heard anyone moving around yet, I expected that our mystery guest had come for one of my teenagers. Certainly I didn’t need to answer the door.

I blotted at the puddle, sopping up the liquid with one of my husband’s socks. Another wave of pink detergent ran out from under the dryer. Kneeling, I used one of Mallory’s hooded sweatshirts to soak up more of the lake. The stuff was everywhere; for every ounce I mopped up, two more emerged from under the dryer. I must have emptied the whole container onto the floor.

By now, liquid detergent soaked through my pants at both knees and had begun to seep through my socks at the ankle. In spite of my best efforts, pink liquid continued running over the floor, back under the dryer, and into the piles of waiting laundry.

I held Mallory’s dripping sweatshirt aloft as I lumbered to stand up. My nose began to itch, whether from dryer dust, moldy linens, or dirty laundry, I could not tell. Dropping the sweatshirt in with the jeans, I tried to scratch my nose. Too late. Though I covered my mouth, a sneeze, loud enough to shatter plate glass, rattled my teeth, and I felt the cold sticky detergent now covering my cheeks.

The doorbell rang again.

“The door, for crying out loud!” Hearing no motion anywhere in the house, I continued to mutter as I headed upstairs to the entry hall. With my luck, it would be the paperboy collecting this month’s payment, or a neighborhood kid for Travis. I didn’t even try to put on a pleasant smile.

With the frustrated energy of an article interrupted, a mess in the laundry room, and having to do everything myself, I threw open the front door without even a glance into the security peephole.

I couldn’t have felt more shock if I’d jumped into a pool of ice water.

“Stephen,” I said, hearing the surprise in my own voice. I sounded like I’d answered the door for Santa Claus. I stood there, one arm holding the door, the other hanging limp beside me, frozen in place. “Stephen,” I said again, with the paralysis of a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. I hate myself when I perform like that.

He leaned casually against the brick surrounding our front porch, one foot resting up behind him, both hands in his jean pockets. A lavender gift bag dangled from his wrist. Dropping his foot and turning toward me he said, “Hello, Colleen.” He sounded unusually shy, almost reluctant to speak.

“Stephen,” I stammered again, finally moving toward him, my arms wide, offering a hug. “I didn’t know you were coming.” Unwilling to let this awkwardness between us continue, I pulled him into my arms. “What a surprise!” Another brilliant statement by the laundry woman.

I held him close, squeezing his shoulders, smelling the fresh scent of his aftershave. How long since I’d held my brother like this? We lingered in the embrace.

As he squeezed me back, I felt tears sting my eyes. I missed this man, this one who had been so long the center of my world. My brother. My twin. My flesh. “How I’ve missed you,” I confessed, patting his back as I squeezed him again.

“I’ve missed you too,” he said. “Brought you something.”

We let go and as I stepped back, Stephen handed me the bag, tissue peeking from the rim. Inside, I found a caramel-colored wooden frame, glossy and smooth. “How beautiful.” Turning it over, I discovered a picture of Stephen and me that I’d never seen before.

I recognized the setting, a high-school beach outing. In the photo, Stephen and I sat together on a log, heads tilted toward one another, deep in conversation. Behind us, the water sparkled in afternoon sunlight. I remembered that we’d had a disagreement that afternoon; a friend had caught us in the act of working out our differences. The picture was beautiful, both for the image itself and the sentiment behind it. “Thank you so much,” I said, hugging the photograph. “I love it.”

I reached up to brush away a stray tear and felt my sticky fingers. How silly I must look, wet knees, sticky hands. Bubbles where tears should have been. “Oh, no,” I said through giggles. “I just spilled laundry soap. I’ve made a terrible mess.”

He looked down at my knees, taking in the dark spots and smiled. “You were always a mess, Colleen. I wouldn’t recognize anything else.”

“Well then, you won’t mind that I’ve covered the back of your sweatshirt with detergent?” I linked my arm through his and pulled him inside. “Because now you’re a mess too.”

I led my brother into the kitchen and offered him a clean dishtowel. “I got detergent on your shoulders,” I said, handing it to him. I turned on the water and began rinsing my own hands and face, drying with another towel.

After I moved away, Stephen rinsed his towel under the faucet and brushed at his shoulders. I watched him, dabbing at the detergent as he leaned against the opposite counter. He wore a half-zip sweatshirt in sage green with a navy stripe trimming the ribbed collar. The white of a crew neck t-shirt peaked out from underneath the zipper. In spite of warm August temperatures, he’d chosen long, lean blue jeans. On his bare feet he wore slip-on deck shoes—a moccasin style I recognized from outerwear catalogs.

My brother looked good. Really good. And as I eyed him, I couldn’t overcome the outright joy I felt in seeing him. It wanted to burst out in giggles. I felt the same longing I have when I see a newborn—that irresistible urge to scoop him up and hold him close, to bury my nose in his neck and smell his skin. The harder I tried to squish my emotions, the more they came alive. I felt tears springing up again. To keep them hidden, I turned away and busied myself with brushing crumbs from the counter onto my palm.

Stephen rinsed his hands, dried them, and turned to face me.

“Coffee?” I offered, trying to sound as though he dropped in to visit several times a week. “Not for me.” He smiled. “I’ve given it up. But I’d take tea, if you have something herbal. Raspberry maybe?”

I raised my eyebrows and laughed out loud. Stephen was the consummate coffee addict. I’d given him a coffee pot to put in his college dorm room. “I can dig up something herbal. But what on earth made you give up coffee?” I pulled a teakettle out of the cupboard and filled it with water.

“You’d be surprised,” he answered. “I’m into clean living these days.”

I started the gas stove, waiting for the flame to catch before I put down the kettle. “Clean living?” I turned to look at him, wondering.

“Not that clean.” Stephen shrugged, his eyes avoiding mine.

I tried to smile, but this one was forced. “So what have you been up to lately?” I threw the words in the air, trying to keep the conversation flowing. Trying to keep some kind of lid on my emotions.

I wanted to scream, Why are you here? Why now? This couldn't be an ordinary visit. Stephen had stayed away far too long to show up now. Almost no phone calls. Very few letters. For more than five years, in spite of my repeated effort, I heard from Stephen only occasionally. Once after mom had a heart episode, he'd called my husband at work, asking about her test results. On my fortieth birthday, two winters ago, he'd sent me a card with no return address.

I'd cried when I opened it.

Stephen turned forty on the same day, and I had no idea where to send his card. As the silent years had passed, I convinced myself I'd learned to live without my other half. But today, I knew—by the twisting pain now shouting in my gut—that I'd never really learned anything. That part, that hurting part, wanted to retaliate. How could you just leave me? How can you walk away from everything we've shared and disappear from my life? Of course I couldn't express it. I sucked it down, swallowed hard, and blinked away the threatening tears.

I listened as he described his last student production. “The advanced class is going to do Our Town this fall,” he said. “I had to re-block it for the new theatre building on campus. We'll open in late November. So I've just finished that. I'll hold auditions in early October.”

“Thornton Wilder,” I said, catching this last information like a life ring. “You've always liked that play.” The kettle began to whistle and I took it off the heat. “How did your classes go this summer?”

“I took the summer off.”

More new information. From our older sister, Carrie, I'd heard that Stephen taught drama at Seattle Community College. Before that, before his big disappearance from my life, Stephen had earned his master's degree and directed small-scale stage productions in Seattle. He had a good singing voice and a charisma that flew over the seats of a theatre, all the way to the back row.

As a kid, Stephen wanted to make it big in theatre. He'd dreamed of playing Broadway, taking Hollywood by storm.

“Hmm,” I tried to sound casual as I poured boiling water over the tea bag in his cup. “Must have been a good break. What did you do?” I handed him the cup.

He cradled the mug, as though warming his fingers around the outside. “I needed a break. I didn't do anything really. Rested a lot. Read a lot. It was a good summer.”

I pulled a cup off the rack for myself and filled it from the coffee pot. “We had a good summer too. Some fun with the boat. Some time on the coast. The kids are growing up so fast.” I slid onto a barstool. “They'll be gone before we know it.”

I watched him dunk the tea in and out of the hot water. Stephen hadn't really told me anything. Still trying to reign in my emotions I asked him, “So, this is a real surprise Stephen. It's great to see you.” I took a sip of coffee.

A lengthy silence hung in my kitchen as I watched him walk over to the silverware drawer and remove a spoon. With skill born of practice, he caught the bag and drained the liquid.

“Honey?” he asked.

I pointed to a cupboard and Stephen reached inside for the honey bear, prying it off the shelf paper. He smiled at me across the kitchen as he held the bear under hot water until the residue dissolved.

“Sorry. Mallory puts honey on her Cheerios. She never cleans up after herself.”

“Right.” Squeezing a stream of honey into his cup, he stirred as it fell. At last satisfied, he put down the spoon and took a sip.

“So,” I began, wondering if I might push the limits. “Not that you aren’t welcome—but what gives? Why did you drop by today?”

“Mom’s party,” he answered. “I heard you were giving her a birthday party, and I decided that I should come.” He took another sip.

“How did you hear?” I moved to the breakfast counter and pulled out a chair. He followed my lead, taking the stool next to mine.

“Carrie told me. I called Kevin to ask if I could join you.”

“Kevin?” I couldn’t hide my surprise. Why would Stephen call my husband instead of me? Why hadn’t Kevin told me? Another stab of disappointment turned to anger inside me.

“e you can,” I said, still dumbfounded by this news. I sighed. “You’re always welcome, Stephen. You know that.”

Looking straight ahead, he nodded, taking my gentle rebuke without comment. Obviously, for reasons I didn’t understand, Stephen didn’t feel welcome. Something I’d done or said—some silly event stood between us—and I didn’t have a clue as to what had happened.

As we sat together that August morning, facing the breakfast bar, it felt to me as though we lived in two separate universes. No matter how much I loved him, Stephen no longer belonged to me, as he had when we were children. He had moved away.

In the silence of my kitchen, I wanted him to know how much his distance hurt me. I wanted to tell him about the times I’d cried, wishing I could share my life with him. I wanted to tell him that losing a brother—a living brother and most especially a twin—felt worse than death. It had to feel worse than death.

But I didn’t say a word.

Looking out the kitchen window, I drank my coffee. Though I sat close enough to touch him, I could not reach him. Instead, I stole glances—noting the wave in his curly blond hair, the shimmer of his blue eyes, the wide cheeks and ruddy complexion—recognizing at once the similarities between my own face and his more rugged, masculine one.

I noted his lean body and wished that we shared that similarity as well. From birth, I have struggled to keep my weight under control. Stephen had different genes. He ate everything he wanted, buttered, sugared, and glazed. On that summer morning, he seemed even more lean than when I had last seen him, and I stifled a feeling of envy.

I looked for signs of aging, grey hair, a softening of the tummy; Stephen looked remarkably good. His hair remained light blond where my natural color had darkened. Though we shared the same fair skin, light lines surrounded his softer, bluer eyes.

For whatever reason, this stranger had come home. Though I did not understand why he had chosen this moment to return, I decided that I would welcome him. There would be plenty of time for questions and explanations. There would be time for understanding and reconnecting.

Lots of time.

That morning, as I sat drinking coffee beside my brother, I hoped that more than the seasons had begun to change in Potter’s Hollow.