



Just-for-show clouds remain from yesterday's storm. Forsythias sounding revelry. Apricots and ~~my~~ our Spring Snow crabapple answering the call with breathy pink and white blossoms—nearly 2 weeks ahead of last year. No more freezes, please!

We drove across the Colorado River on a bridge as graceful as a bow. Before us, a carnival sky reflected the flavors of snow cones—grape, cherry, lemon, and my personal favorite, tangerine. Just above the rim of the Uncompahgre Plateau, the setting sun gilded the voluminous remains of a storm.

“We’re such a cliché,” I said, “driving into a sunset, happily ever after.”

Larry drove with one hand on the wheel and the other resting on my knee. A doughy smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. I smiled, too—from the rumble of the floorboard to the top of my head. The wedding had been mostly perfect, and we’d welcomed the late-winter blizzard that extended our honeymoon on Willard Lake by a day. Less than an hour ago, we’d dug through a snowdrift to free Larry’s car, and now we passed from winter to spring as we descended six thousand feet from the top of the Grand Mesa to the valley floor. Colorado is crazy that way.

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The interstate skirted the barren slopes of the Book Cliffs, a severe escarpment of Mancos shale strewn with boulders the size of houses. Rows upon rows of fruit trees and grapevines filled the south side of the highway, where the river fed the irrigation canals. Their branches were nothing but spindly fingers, except for the apricot trees teased by the balmy weather to unfurl their pink blossoms—such imprudent behavior after only a few warm days. The valley floor lay before us like a calm sea—desert hills scarred by dirt bike trails to the north and farms tilled in a rich red loam to the south. The Book Cliff Mountains and the Uncompahgre Plateau and the Grand Mesa girded the valley like a broad belt. Usually a comforting sight, the cliffs thrummed at an apprehension I'd done my best to ignore in the weeks leading up to the wedding.

The car slowed as we took the first exit for Orchard City and headed south toward home. *Our* home. The inevitable sadness of a carnival rolling out of town nudged me, but I shrugged off the feeling.

When we stopped at the last intersection before turning up Crawford Avenue and home, I squeezed Larry's hand. "You better wipe that silly grin off your face."

His grin widened. "Can't be done. This is what loving you does to me."

I kissed the back of his hand for saying so. "Ready for reentry?"

"Absolutely."

Over my shoulder, the sunset had faded to a nightlight down a long hallway.



Larry's overgrown tabby, Goliath, sat on a kitchen chair grooming herself. Connie, my friend and now my mother-in-law, peeled potatoes with Larry at the sink. Ky would be home soon, and the picture would be complete. The only thing left for me to do was set the table.

I lifted the cat off the chair and opened a drawer to gather the silverware, but tongs and spatulas filled the dividers instead. "Oh my goodness, where's the silverware?" My face warmed at the thought of

the crumbs that had accumulated in the silverware dividers. “I didn’t mean for you to clean the drawers, Connie.”

She quartered a potato into the steaming pot and wiped her hands. “I hope you don’t mind. I did a little reorganizing. I’d be happy to put things back. It’s just that I nearly wore myself out setting the table every night.” She opened the drawer under the coffeepot to reveal the silverware. “Having the silverware near the dining room made setting the table so much easier. And in the upper cabinet, you’ll find your coffee mugs and herb teas.”

Connie had stayed at the house with my son, Ky, while Larry and I honeymooned on the Grand Mesa. Five days. Maybe she cleaned the attic, too? Better yet, there were Ky’s room and the basement.

“I think you’ll like how I organized your spice cabinet, too.”

The spice cabinet?

“Come see,” she said.

Larry dried his hands. “I’ll take the luggage up to the room.” *Is he scurrying?*

I rolled my shoulders against a growing tension and followed Connie to the cabinet beside the stove. She stopped abruptly and turned to face me. Her eyes glistened with tears, and she smiled like a newly crowned Miss America. She pulled me into a tight hug, a new intimacy for us. “It’s so fun to have a daughter,” she said. “I couldn’t be happier.”

“Thank you, Connie. I’m happy, too.” *But I liked my kitchen the way it was.*

She released me to check the progress of the roast in the oven. A primal territorial zeal overcame me, and I fought the urge to jump on the island to plant a flag. The kitchen wasn’t big enough for another woman. Or was it? I had to admit Connie’s changes made sense, and it was wonderful to come home to the aroma of a roast in the oven. So why did I feel compelled to mark my territory? *Get a grip, girl!* I needed water and time to think. I found the glasses in the last cabinet I opened.

Connie had whooped for joy when Larry and I had announced our engagement in February. Surely her manic rearranging flowed from giddiness. The Connie I knew—ever-present, ever-willing, a true friend, and now my mother-in-law—suffered from never-say-no syndrome,

not a queen bee complex. Once the sparkle of having a daughter-in-law and grandson faded a bit, she would settle down, and we'd share a laugh when she discovered I'd moved the silverware back to its original place.

When I offered to help Connie with dinner, she said, "You're still on your honeymoon until tomorrow, so sit down and relax." She adjusted the flame under the potatoes and slid a pan of dinner rolls into the oven.

In all the time I'd known Connie, stretching back to our earliest days in Orchard City and Ky's days on the cradle roll at church, she had permed her gray hair into tight ringlets. But like me, she had fallen under the influence of Louise, my best friend, who could talk a bee out of its hum. After an afternoon with Louise at Virginia's Oasis of Beauty just before the wedding, Connie had returned with soft waves of moonlit copper and a hint of pink gloss on her lips. Picture a daisy's wide-eyed attention to detail—that was Connie, certainly not a meddling mother-in-law.

Ky arrived home just as Connie took the roast out of the oven. It still amazed me how he'd grown to fill the doorway. He stood there, disheveled and flush-faced from baseball practice. He looked from Larry to me and said, "Hey, you're home" before he refilled his water bottle.

Connie spoke with the authority of Nurse Ratchet. "Get your hands washed. Dinner's on the table." Something in her voice told me Ky and Connie's days together had not been completely pleasant.

Ky picked up his bag and squeezed past me to the hall. "I'll eat later. I'm not hungry."

Connie leaned toward me, her voice frayed. "I'd make that boy sit down and eat with his family. He hid in his room most of the time you were gone. We only ate together once."

I looked to Larry. He loaded his plate with mashed potatoes, meaning any action was up to me, just as we'd planned. Every stepfamily book we'd read reiterated the same point: the biological parent must be the disciplinarian. All-righty, but parenting an almost-man was difficult enough. I didn't need an audience.

I caught up to Ky as he started up the stairs. “Hey there, how about sitting down with us? It would be nice to hear about your week.”

He looked behind me, so I looked too. Connie, wringing her hands, watched us from the hallway. Larry stood behind her. The threat of a storm darkened Ky’s eyes, yet he managed to speak with control. “No thanks.”

He seldom ate right after practice. He was hot. And, oh boy did he need a shower. But most of all, he needed to decompress from his day. Larry knew that. But still, having dinner together on our first night as a family would be nice. “What’s up?” I asked him.

He shrugged and continued up the stairs. “I’m just not hungry.”

I believed him, but more than I liked to admit, Connie’s approval mattered to me. “Ky?” *Pretty please, come eat dinner with us and pretend like you’re interested in telling us about your classes and friends.*

“Stop right there, Ky.” It was Larry, sliding past his mother to join me at the base of the stairs. I touched his arm and Larry stopped, but Ky didn’t. He continued climbing the stairs, almost with a swagger, throwing down the gauntlet as surely as any rookie knight.

Larry shouted, “Don’t walk away when your mother’s talking to you!”

The power of Larry’s voice startled me. Ky didn’t even turn around. “I have stuff to do,” he said.

Larry climbed a stair and I caught the crook of his arm, but still his anger flared. “You’re not doing anything until you’ve shown your mother the respect she deserves.”

Not only had Larry usurped my command, but by demanding respect from a teenager, he’d given Ky plenty of ammunition for a passive-aggressive counterattack. What was I to do—back up Larry with a fresh offensive or sound a retreat to regroup the troops? Right or wrong, I waved a white flag. “Ky, take a shower and come down when you’re hungry.”

Connie returned to the kitchen, mumbling, “I don’t know about that.”

Larry used a stage whisper I could have heard from Kansas. “You can’t let him talk to you like that.”

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Just a handful of hours earlier, I'd watched Larry brush his teeth and declared myself the luckiest woman alive. Had anything changed since then? Only that we'd stepped back into reality. A husband, a son, a mother-in-law, a cat, and a dog. *Where is Blink?* I had a family again. That was all good and nothing I couldn't handle. A few more birthdays to remember, personalities to accommodate, the normal stuff of families. *Right?*

Larry slumped to the bottom stair, head in his hands. "I blew it, didn't I? I'm so sorry. You married some kind of Neanderthal."

Who could disdain that kind of humility? Just for him to hear, I said, "Round one to the kid. Tomorrow's another day."



I nudged Larry's shoulder to stop his snoring. He mumbled an apology and rolled away from me. His breathing deepened within a heartbeat. I lay atop the new mattress like a magician on a bed of nails. By the time Larry started snoring again, my lower back ached.

I blinked at the ceiling and replayed the day Larry and I had stripped the wallpaper off the master bedroom walls to transform the room from Scott and Mibby's bedchamber to Larry and Mibby's love nest. I'd worked a corner of wallpaper free with a putty knife and pulled slowly like the nice man at the paint store had instructed. A sodden piece, no bigger than a footprint, tore off. "This is nuts," I said.

On the opposite wall, Larry swiped a scoring tool over the wallpaper with broad, confident strokes. "Give the remover time to work," he said and returned to whistling along with the radio.

At first, we'd only planned to remove the wallpaper—Larry had complained it was a little flowery for his taste—and replace it with a manlier yet humble shade of green paint. But once we'd dismantled the bed and removed the furniture from the room, Larry's shoulders had relaxed. He talked about his preference for mission-style furniture and questioned whether the king-sized bed overpowered the space. Larry isn't the sort of man who has style preferences, furniture or otherwise. Not because he lacks an appreciation for beauty—he's downright poetic

when it comes to naming his hybrid dahlias. Larry's contentment centers on soft jeans and an uncluttered life, not a magazine-perfect home. In that way, we are perfect for each other.

Talking about mission furniture was Larry's way of saying something without actually saying it. The bedroom's hydrangea wallpaper had wrapped the most intimate of spaces for Scott and me. The king-sized bed and the antique furnishings were remnants of Scott's presence. I should have seen it sooner, no matter that Scott had been gone from this world for more than two years. So I scrubbed the room down to the bones to make it something completely different, not unlike how you wipe out the kitchen cabinets no matter how clean the previous owner left them. We charged the limit on the J. C. Penney credit card and raced to ready the room for new furniture and linens before the wedding.

As I waited for the wallpaper remover to do its job, I wondered how many times the century-old house had been remade to accommodate new residents. Scott and I had removed a wall to join two bedrooms. We'd wanted a modern master suite with an actual closet and a bathroom. I couldn't help thinking that all of our fretting and scraping had made the plain Jane Victorian roll its eyes, knowing someone would eventually come along to replace the wall and dismantle the closet.

The next piece of wallpaper I pried away was the size of Maui—in a pocket atlas—and the paper backing remained adhered to the wall. "There has to be a better way."

Larry wrapped his arms around me, and I leaned into his embrace. "Let's forget all of this," he said. "The Elvis Chapel of Love is only eight hours away—seven if you let me do the driving."

"Does Elvis do wallpaper?"

It had been Larry's eagerness, nay, his exuberance that had persuaded me to move the wedding from the fall up to March eleventh, shoehorning the wedding between my son's basketball season and the beginning of baseball practice. This only perturbed Larry's side of the family, the McManus clan, because the eleventh of March happened to be the fiftieth wedding anniversary of Larry's aunt and uncle. Neverthe-

less, we booked the church and sent the invitations, but I still hadn't found a pair of sophisticated yet youthful buttercream shoes to wear with my wedding dress. Driving to Las Vegas sounded reasonable.

Standing there with Maui in my hand, I asked, "Are we rushing things?"

That wasn't the first time I'd asked the question. Larry didn't waste words. He tightened his embrace, and I told myself I was crazy to worry. Marrying Larry was the smartest thing I could do. He was earnest and conscientious, possessed an inconspicuous intellect, and was strong in all the ways men liked to be strong, yet tender and vulnerable without being brittle. Loving him had emboldened me to step over the starting line of life. And Larry loved my son—no doubt about that.

Isn't that enough?

Pastor Dale thought so. When we first went to him for premarital counseling, he said our quick decision to marry troubled him. Adult love and marriage is different, he'd said, mostly because the people involved *are* adults—adults who have collected odd bits and pieces of heartache like a decorator crab collects ocean debris on its shell. But Larry and I had talked about everything. Dreams. Money. Values. Wounds. Disappointments. And, of course, Ky. After two sessions with Pastor Dale, he'd taken out his planner and asked, "What date were you thinking about?"

Even with the changes Larry and I had made to the bedroom, all that had been familiar remained: the bar of light projected onto the wall from the streetlight, the hum of the traffic on the business loop, and the incessant yapping of the Bridgewater's bichon frise. The darkness condensed time and handed a microphone to my self-doubt. I glanced at Larry sleeping beside me. *Do I even know this guy?*

I threw back the covers and headed for the kitchen and, hopefully, a piece of leftover wedding cake from the freezer. When I reached into a drawer for a fork and pulled out a can opener, I flipped on the kitchen light and moved the silverware and glasses and potholders back where they belonged but left the spices in their new order. I wanted to stake my claim, not be spiteful. I sat at the island, eating carrot cake warmed in the microwave. The cream cheese frosting stuck to the roof

of my mouth. Before long, the day's should-haves whispered in my ear: You *should have* followed Ky upstairs and talked to him privately. You *should have* waited until the end of the dinner blessing to complain about Goliath licking your bread. You *should have* waited until the end of *Good Eats* to ask Connie if she needed help carrying her luggage out to her car. And you should *not* have groaned when Connie announced that Goliath would be living with you.

Blink, my black Labrador, whined at me from the utility porch. I sat on the floor beside his new bed, a plaid pillow Connie had appliquéd with his name. He hefted himself from the floor to wash my face with his soft tongue.

"I know, I know, everything's different. But trust me, sleeping on the porch isn't that bad. Larry snores. You wouldn't like it. The cat? She's a problem. I'll talk to Larry."

Blink did something he'd never done before. He lay across my lap and sighed. What a conniving dog. "That won't work. You're not getting into bed with me . . . I mean us." But I didn't push him off my lap. I leaned against the broom closet and scratched the silky spot behind his ears.

The computer pinged to announce the arrival of an e-mail. "Sorry, bud, this could be important." *Or it could be the hundredth offer for discount prescription drugs.* When I opened the message, the screen pulsed with smacking lips and swaying wedding bells. I muted the speakers to drown out a mechanical rendition of "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing." The body of the e-mail read:

welcome home! i wish i was there with you guys :-(i'd make you an omelet with veggies and blueberry salsa . . . remember? ha! :-D just got home from bible study. whoa, did you know that jesus spits out the lukewarm churches . . . he's no wimp . . . Gracie cried for over an hour but nobody said anything . . . Darlia just held her hand. She stopped crying before we shared prayer requests. SHE'S GETTING BETTER!!!! :o) my only student with promise is truant . . . pray for her . . . name's Lien-hua. She has a boyfriend . . . so young & tough. God wants me here i know it. a new guy in the building asked me out for coffee . . . he likes

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iced mochas too . . . match made in heaven? hey, i have an idea
so pray for me too, love andrea
ps-thinking of a septum ring!

Andrea is my stepdaughter—my deceased husband’s daughter from his first marriage. That’s a mouthful, but the truth is, God sent Andrea to me when I needed to learn how to love with an open heart. Scott never told me about Andrea or her mother, his first wife. Assimilating that bit of information while grieving my dead husband nearly popped my cork—until I got to know Andrea. If she was a flower in my garden, she would be a bleeding heart, delicate with startling details, a jewel among the ordinary. She lived with Ky and me for two summers but then moved to San Francisco full-time to teach middle school orchestra. I can’t think of a more challenging job, and I envy Andrea’s buoyancy. For her, every turn in life holds fresh possibilities.

I closed my eyes to pray for Lien-hua. What to pray for a middle school girl completely confounded me, so I opened my eyes and wrote a short response to Andrea, making a promise to call her on Sunday: *All’s well here. Yea Gracie! Yea Darlia! God bless Lien-hua! Is this the same guy you wrote about last week? Nose ring? A garnet stud and a ring might make your nose seem cluttered. Love, Mom.*

I considered telling Andrea about Connie’s rearranging the kitchen cabinets, but I thought better of it. Andrea loved to tease me about having a gourmet kitchen to make boxed macaroni and cheese. Connie was just being helpful, as per her usual. Instead, I added a P.S. about Goliath. *Love the man, love the cat, I guess. Now, go to bed. I love you!* I hit the send button and hoped she would notice how helpful capitalization and punctuation could be.

The light shone under Ky’s door, so I knocked and waited for permission to enter. He deserved at least three seconds of privacy now and again. He sat bent over the atlas at his desk.

“Ky, it’s ten-thirty. Do you have a lot of homework?”

“Mostly humanities stuff.”

In his evolution from boy to man, Ky was inching his way past the midpoint. His limbs, tightly knotted with muscles, grew increasingly

hairy, and he shaved most days, although I couldn't say with certainty that he brushed his teeth for more than five seconds.

"Did everything go okay with Connie while we were gone?"

He turned to me. "She wants me to call her Grandma."

"She does?"

"I told her I'd think about it."

"You're very generous. I appreciate it."

I kissed him good-night—not on the lips or cheek anymore but at the hairline of his forehead, where tiny pimples pricked my lips. I told him to get to bed soon, which I knew was futile but felt obliged to say it. When I lingered a beat too long, Ky said, "What?"

"It's going to take a while to get used to the new—"

"It's no big deal."

"Your happiness matters to us. I'll talk to Connie. And Larry . . . he'll get better. He really cares about you."

"Like I said, it's no big deal." He turned back to his books. "Listen, I have a geography test tomorrow. I have to be able to draw Southeast Asia and label the major cities and geographical features like rivers and stuff. These names are killing me."

As usual, I'd made more of what had happened that night than I should have. "See you in the morning." I waited for his reply, but he was tracing a map from the atlas.

Before I closed the door, Ky said, "Oh yeah, they're hiring delivery guys at Pizza Man. I thought I'd give it a try."

"You have so much going on already. You'll be traveling for baseball soon, and school . . . You hardly sleep as it is."

"My next car insurance bill is due in July. Besides, there's another guy on the team who works there. He says the manager is really good about working around his schedule."

"I don't know . . ."

"Do you have to talk to Larry first?" There was no mistaking the contempt in his voice.

"I'll discuss it with Larry and let you know."

I closed the door softly, more for Larry's sake than Ky's, and returned to my bedroom. A large gray lump snored on my side of the

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bed. Goliath. When a few nuggets of Friskies didn't entice her off the bed, I sat on my pillow and pushed her to the foot of the bed with my feet. I drew my knees to my chest to lie down. In his sleep, Larry reached out and took my hand.

Love the man. Love the cat? *Not hardly*. Goliath hit the floor, on her feet, I assumed.

I set the alarm for four o'clock, winced, and added fifteen minutes. I wanted to make breakfast for Larry before he left for work at five. Did I need half an hour to make toast and oatmeal? Cold cereal with a sliced banana took three minutes tops. I tapped the minute button on the alarm until the jumbo numbers read 4:45.

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