

Endings

Sometimes love works out all right after all. You live the best you can, wait patiently until it seems almost too late to matter, and then—maybe Romeo drops the pseudo-poison bottle and it shatters. Juliet misplaces her dagger. Or, their feuding parents dead of old age, the two kids finally get together. Happily ever after? To borrow from Shakespeare again, that is the question.

My father met my mother on the merry-go-round at Hershey Park. She was fifteen, petite and dark-eyed. He was a lanky, serious farm boy of nineteen. He had been in love with another girl, the story went, but Grandpa would not allow him to date her because she was Catholic. My mother captured him with her beauty--and perhaps with the implication that she was pregnant. His proposal was, "Well, then I guess we'll have to get married." The carousel was the perfect metaphor for their life together, going in pointless circles, hanging on. The marriage lasted forty-seven years, most of them bitterly unhappy. My father took to drink and distance, fishing and gardening for stress relief. Eventually the house was surrounded by a variety of rosebushes. My mother was possessive and dissatisfied, filled with a rage she vented on her unwanted children. She died of ovarian cancer, anger turned inward, calling his name.

When my father courted Nonni, the woman who became my stepmother, he told me, "She's not pretty like your mother." To me, she was adorable. She was square and round at the same time, a small box of a woman with curly hair that boiled wildly on her scalp. Her skin was spotted from years of working in the sun. After almost fifty years of waiting for each other through unhappy marriages, they were free to take their vows in a Methodist church with a reception and a six-layer cake. Nonni was tremulous and shy. Dad was radiant and proud. The cake was piled high with frosting. It was a good day.

They had two years together. Dad was seventy-two and on Lidocaine for arrhythmia. One day at home he fell to the floor unconscious and didn't wake up. My stepmother called the ambulance.

The doctor, needlessly cruel, said to Nonni, "How much Lidocaine did you give him?" A grieving and guilt-ridden Nonni relayed this remark to me. She said, "You know I would never hurt your father." I knew.

When he stopped breathing on his own, the doctors put him on a respirator. They called Nonni and me into the room to see him. His chest was bare and the flimsy hospital blanket was thrown back. The forced air yanked his chest up and down violently, as if his ribs would tear his skin apart. The doctors wanted us to see how much of his life was now mechanical. Nonni flinched and swayed. Then she recovered and straightened herself, grasping my hand. She still refused permission to take him off life support.

It was a lost cause. Nonni wept on my shoulder: "Sometimes I feel like I'm *keeping* him here." I pictured him looking across his favorite fishing creek at sun-drenched fields. He was already gone, I thought.

Eventually the doctors made a unilateral decision to take him off the respirator. Nonni whirled abruptly toward me: small, square, her eyeglasses reflecting light so that I couldn't see her eyes. "And I want you to know," she said with uncharacteristic volume and force, "it was not *my* decision!"

She went often to his grave at the cemetery on Gravel Hill. It must have seemed strange to kneel there with my mother's name beside Dad's on one side of the stone, and Nonni's name on the other with an open end-date.

She said to me once, "Sometimes I think he can't really be gone. Sometimes I feel like I have to dig him up with my hands."

On another one of my visits she said, "The Bible gives us seventy years. I'm living on borrowed time." She said it cheerfully. Time ran out—she developed a pain in her back. The doctor didn't seem to be able to alleviate it. Too late, she was diagnosed with lung cancer and died in the hospital.

The Bible also sets limits on marriage—it says people are not married in Heaven. They become like the angels, singing praises, walking on streets of gold. I think of all that love, now directed toward God as he wipes their tears away. But what I really would like to believe is this:

My father is in the back yard of his home, tending to his roses. He has a hand with flowers. The fuchsia hardy azalea has stretched itself all over the side of the garage. The roses, a multitude of species and colors, are all bigger than his fist. Nonni comes through the French doors out to the patio in her housedress and apron, carrying frosted glasses of ice tea. Her lipstick is wearing off. Her curls are wild. He looks up, smiling. When she hands him a glass, their fingers touch. The soft evening light scatters gold all around.