

Endings

3202 words

Whenever an email from Carolyn arrived, I took a deep breath. Not so with calls and cards, but an email often meant someone had died. With no close childhood friends or family left in Fairview to inform me, I was grateful Carolyn had graciously taken on the task.

She was saddened to say Sherwin Pierce had passed away. I skipped a lot of the funerals now—it was over a two-hour drive home—but not this one. Dr. Pierce had been my father's lifelong friend, roommate at The Citadel, buddy in the war. He'd visited the house after Daddy died, telling stories about the two of them that made me laugh while I cried.

My parents' friends were nearly gone, the few remaining moving into their 90's. My mother had been the youngest to die at 64. I missed her as much as the morning she left the earth from a rare cancer more than 30 years ago. That day is mostly a blur, except for Carolyn, the image of her sitting on the front stoop, waiting, hands in her lap, when we arrived home from the hospital. She pattered around the kitchen, greeting visitors, stacking casseroles in the refrigerator. I still remember what she wore: a silky teal blouse tucked into an expensive tweed skirt that she covered with an old apron scrounged from a drawer in the sideboard.

I called her Mrs. Morgan then because I'd been taught in childhood to call elders by title and surname. I don't know when I began to call my mother's friend by her first name, when she'd become my own close friend and her husband, too, Daniel.

Just before she left late that afternoon, I mustered the nerve to ask about Walker—Carolyn and Daniel's younger son and once my best friend—coming to the funeral. He lived one

town away where he was the attorney for the school district. His wife managed a dental office. By then I hadn't seen him in several years. But he had loved my mother, eaten many meals at her table, so surely . . .

"Walker asked me to say how sorry he is," Carolyn said. "He promises to write to you. I'm sorry, Jessa. He's got work he can't get away from." I knew it was a lie and thought surely guilt was part of the reason Carolyn hadn't left our house all day. Of all people, she knew what her son meant to me. Writing a note wouldn't make up for his absence. Her hand reached out to stroke my arm, but I hardly felt the touch. My arm, my whole body, had gone rigid. Later that night my upper arms and chest broke out in hives.

Until Walker danced with a girl we'd barely known in high school at our ten-year high school reunion and the girl became his wife, we'd been inseparable friends. Since before I had memories. At least kindergarten because there is an old 8mm film of him pushing me in a wheelbarrow on the playground, dumping me onto the grass, children clapping while I brush off my backside, grinning.

When Walker and his wife Rachel were dating, everything seemed fine. Like with other girls he'd gone out with. He brought her to a Christmas party upstate where Hank—my husband—and I lived. She complimented the mantel decorations while Hank bragged about going to the grocery to pick out the apples, one by one, to adorn the cushions of magnolia leaves. Rachel's smile had seemed genuine. What strange things I could remember.

On their wedding day, Hank and I arrived barely in time—standing in the narthex—to hear the finale from Handel's *Water Music* as my friend and his bride—glowing pink-cheeked in a high-necked wedding gown, stiff lace cupping her chin—recessed up the aisle. Not at the

bride's church, but in the small Episcopal sanctuary where Walker and I were confirmed. I wondered, even now, if missing the ceremony had changed . . . but no . . . he'd insisted we go to Hank's cousin's wedding the same day, an hour earlier, but an hour distant. He made me promise not to fly up the interstate to make the ceremony, to be safe.

I ran straight for Walker at the reception, embracing him. Was Rachel watching, thinking I hung on too long? Because that was the last time I'd seen him—though I issued invitations—except for brief hellos when we were home on Christmas or Easter at church, Walker's voice too cheerful, Rachel always at his elbow.

I zigzagged my way among people at Dr. Pierce's reception, speaking to acquaintances and old friends. People I hadn't seen in so long that some were hard to recognize. Some whose names had left me. But there was Carolyn—an oasis. I watched her set out a platter of finger sandwiches, pour glasses full with ice tea, until duties complete, she meandered into the crowd. How did a woman nearing the end of her 80's—88 to be precise—have so much energy? She stopped beside her husband, elegant in a bowtie and dark suit, conversing with a group of men.

I approached, calling to them.

"Oh, Jessa, what a joy," she exclaimed. "And wearing some gorgeous pumps." She pointed at my feet.

I didn't believe funeral dress should be all somber. Yes, I was wearing a black shift, but I also wore red heels to celebrate a person I'd cared for. I kicked up the toe of my right shoe in Carolyn's direction.

Carolyn tugged her bright green scarf into better view from under the lapels of her dark navy jacket. "We agree," she said, and hugged me.

"Did you spot Sherwin's boys?" she asked when we parted. I nodded. I'd spoken to the twins when I first walked in. They were five years younger, my faraway baby brother's age, little pests underfoot when I were growing up. They still looked very much alike with their salt and pepper hair. When we were young, a few years created a world of difference. Time changed everything.

Daniel stepped forward to enfold me, and Carolyn hugged me again. I inhaled their familiarity: the fragrances of pipe tobacco and gardenia perfume.

"How's Hank?" Daniel stood back all tall and proper, cleared his throat.

"Good. Still teaching part-time. He had two classes today or would be here. He tells his friends I won't let him retire." Hank and I cared for each other, but much of what once drew us together had long slipped away. I would never confess to Carolyn it was mainly our children and grandchildren that held us together now. For years, I'd poured my passion into my art. Hank did what Hank wanted to do, and I paid it little mind.

"Give him our best." Carolyn patted my back. "Have you seen Alex?" she asked then. I hadn't yet spotted Walker's older brother. Quiet, earthy, never married, he'd taught Walker and me how to sail his Sunfish one summer on the neighborhood pond.

That lovely, little sailboat. Its vibrant orange and yellow-striped canvas catching a tender breeze the first time Walker and I took it out by ourselves. All afternoon, we skimmed along

under a sky shining hot with yellow sun, facing each other, but not talking. Silence never made us nervous.

“Do we have to stop?” I’d asked, seeing Walker glance at his watch.

“Not by me, but it’s past 6 o’clock. Think you need to check in?”

“I guess,” I’d sighed. My parents were worrywarts. We sailed ashore and dragged the hull onto the mud-slick bank. Walker climbed ahead—we were both heaving a little—when he suddenly turned around. I remember the searching look in his gray-green eyes before his long, lanky body pressed against me, before he kissed me, astonishing me. I stumbled on a half-buried rock in the path and Walker caught my fall. We looked at each other, awkward, before we continued up the hill.

That night I lay on my back in bed, staring at the dark ceiling, twisting my pillow back and forth. I tried deep breathing, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Walker’s kiss. How he’d broken a rule we never made, and I didn’t know what to do, so I’d pulled away. Why did we never speak of that afternoon? He never kissed me again.

“Alex, look who’s here,” Carolyn said. I blinked hard, returning to the room.

“Little sister,” Alex called, loping toward me. I threw my arms around his lean, stringy shoulders. They felt like Walker. My breath caught.

“Long time,” he said, standing back, grinning. “Really long. You haven’t changed, girl. You been to the Fountain of Youth? You look great.”

“Are you kidding? Look at these bags,” I touched the skin under my eyes. Alex chuckled. Carolyn shook her head at us and moved off with Daniel to a little knot of elder ladies nearby.

“Don’t see them. Hey, that’s a beautiful seascape you painted, hanging in the parents’ living room.”

“It meant the world to me when your mom admired that canvas,” I said, thrilled to know the painting I had given Carolyn and Daniel hung in a prominent place.

“What do you call the style?” he asked.

“Sort of abstract impressionism,” I laughed a little uneasily. I never felt comfortable trying to define how I painted.

“Incredible colors. How about pulling up some other pieces for me to see?”

I pulled my phone from my bag, opened my website and handed Alex the phone.

“Beautiful,” he exclaimed, scrolling through. “This one with the yellow and orange sail on the water,” he said lifting his finger, glancing at me. “Looks like my old Sunfish.”

“It is,” I confessed.

“Oh, those days,” he said.

I felt heat in my face. “Have you retired?” I asked abruptly.

“Yep. Last year. No more overseeing operations and budgets for the South Carolina State Park Service. I’ve moved home where I commune with the possums and raccoons on my farm.”

Walker and I had wanted to hike with Alex on the Appalachian Trail the summer after his senior year in high school. Walker petitioned our parents on a sheet of yellow legal paper with a long list of reasons, but it was all for naught. They thought we were too young.

“Alex, do you, . . . ?” I faltered.

“Do I what?” He handed my phone back, touched his forehead briefly to mine.

“No, sorry.” This wasn’t the time or place.

“Say it, baby sister. Come on, it’s only me.”

I swallowed hard and then I blurted, “I haven’t seen Walker in over 30 years. Our only communication is Christmas cards with pictures of our families. If I’m lucky, he includes a handwritten phrase at the end of the letter he pens to everyone about the mostly great things that happened that year.” I stopped, saliva filling my cheeks. I swallowed again.

“I’m sorry,” Alex murmured. “We all are.” His mouth twisted.

My ankles felt loose above my feet, like I might collapse, but I had to know. “She hates me, doesn’t she?”

Alex shifted from one foot to the other.

“Why? What did I do?” I held my breath.

“Sweet Jessa, you did nothing. My brother was once in love with you. Maybe . . . she . . .”

“No, we were best friends,” I stammered.

“Yes,” he said, “that, too,” and pulled me to his chest. Forgetting I was at Dr. Pierce’s funeral, an occasion demanding dignity and decorum, I went limp.

“Break it up, you two, I have an idea,” Carolyn said, appearing suddenly beside us. I willed my knees to straighten. Alex kept his hand on my back.

“Jessa should have an art show in Fairview. Good gracious, it should have happened long before now.” I exhaled, forced myself to her attention, forced Alex’s words away.

“You know Jessa paints gorgeous, colorful landscapes,” she continued.

“Sure I do. I was just looking at some.”

“I have in mind that I secure the exhibition hall at the Arts Center, Jessa hangs paintings and donates a percentage of proceeds to your Midlands Land Trust.”

“Alex is chair of the board,” she said aside to me. “You broadcast it on the website to entice members to attend,” Carolyn turned back to Alex, her voice getting more excited. “A modest ticket price will cover the caterer. I’ll get Rudy to print a piece in the newspaper. Or online or something. Wherever it is people read now that gets their attention.”

“I like it,” Alex said.

“We’re planning an art show,” she said to Daniel, who’d meandered back to us.

“Whose art?” he asked.

“Jessa’s, of course.” Carolyn grasped my hand. “Soon.”

“Well, of course.” Daniel touched two fingers to his temple.

I couldn’t help my next thought. That maybe Walker would attend.

A month before the show planned for an April evening, a strange and dangerous virus shut down every public event, not just in South Carolina but in the whole country. The World Health Organization named it Covid-19 and said it came from China.

Carolyn was undeterred. She thought—everyone thought—the virus wouldn’t last long. We rescheduled for late summer.

“Christmas holiday is the time it was meant to be,” Carolyn declared on the phone in October after the virus persisted, and we had to cancel the second time. “That’s when people spend money.”

By mid-November it was clear people wouldn’t be gathering during the holidays. We cancelled again.

The handwriting on Carolyn’s Christmas card—a lovely snow scene covered with silver glitter—looked shaky. I didn’t pay it much mind. She would soon be 90, after all.

In early January I answered a call from a number I didn’t recognize. Probably, a scammer telling me I’d been robbed on Amazon or Donald Trump wanting my money. I don’t know what made me answer.

“Jessa?” a quiet female voice inquired, then quickly rushed forward. “I’m Brenda Gibbons. Carolyn Morgan hired me to cater your art exhibit? Though we didn’t get to . . .”

“Yes, hello,” I interrupted, confused because we had no plans to reschedule the event.

“I worked with Carolyn a lot. We became friends. I know how much she cared for you. I thought you’d want to know. She died early this morning.”

A twisted knot of nothing constricted my throat. “How? Covid?” I finally managed.

“Breast cancer.”

“No . . .not . . . I would know . . .” I couldn’t speak coherently.

“She told almost no one. She confided in me because I’ve had breast cancer, too.”

“I’m sorry,” I said after a long moment. Then, “Will there be a funeral?” I burst out. I couldn’t stand the thought of Covid restrictions preventing me from

“Cases are down here. A service is planned,” Brenda said amid my thoughts.

“Thank God,” I said.

Hank and I both needed the bathroom after the drive. I took us in through the back entrance that led into the Sunday School Building. Never mind the years, I recognized Rachel from behind—narrow hips, legs thin as twigs clad in black tights below a heavy gray dress — walking toward the ladies’ room. I had no desire to meet her one on one.

I retreated around the corner to wait and saw the Morgan men enter, wearing masks against Covid—walking toward where I stood alone in the hall near the door of the family waiting room. Walker strode ahead of Daniel, Alex in the rear. They spotted me at the same moment I raised my hand in greeting.

Pulling my own mask into place, I stepped forward to embrace Daniel. When had his shoulders become so stooped? From the corner of my eye, I saw Walker step beside his father.

“Hey there, Jessa,” he said when I pulled back from Daniel. Walker’s voice was smooth, familiar, like we’d seen each other maybe last week. He leaned into my side and briefly grasped my shoulder.

“I know how much Mama appreciated you,” he said. It sounded like something he’d say to anyone.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” I spluttered. “She sent a Christmas card only a few days ago.” I pulled down my mask as the men had done. Walker and I stood in front of each other. Age had been kind to him: full head of hair, few wrinkles, fit. He looked even younger in person than in his recent Christmas card.

“I can’t believe that. She was in terrific pain.”

I winced at the thought of Carolyn hurting. “Her handwriting was wobbly. I thought it was just age. No one told me,” I said, trying to keep my voice level, remembering the valediction on her card, “With all my love, always.”

Hank appeared from the bathroom. Walker looked relieved and clasped my husband's hand. "Great to see you, both of you," Walker spoke enthusiastically. "Love keeping up with your growing family."

It sounded surreal, Walker talking like our families had been connected all these years. When all it had ever been was photos on Christmas cards and his round-robin letters.

"How are your grandchildren? Four now, right?" he continued.

"That's right, and you have five." I felt the brittle edge in my voice.

"Do dogs count for me?" Alex asked, kind man, threading his arm through mine.

"This guy's a wonderful uncle," Walker pointed an elbow toward his brother. "Listen, we should get together sometime. Whenever y'all are coming this way, Jessa, let us all know. Rachel and I would . . ."

Just as he said her name, she appeared, mask down around her neck, her face pulled taut.

Walker put a hand out toward his wife. "Jessa and Hank are here."

"I see, hello, thank you for coming." Rachel rolled back her shoulders like she was fighting exhaustion.

"I was just saying if they are ever in town, we'd love to get together and . . ." Walker started.

"Of course," Rachel stopped her husband's sentence. Fine, tight lines— laugh lines—formed along her upper lip.

It was a beautiful service, the rector reminding us of Carolyn's infinite goodness toward others. My heart clenched into a hard pit at the memories he told, but I didn't break down. Not until I saw the ladies standing behind platters of finger food at the reception, pouring out coffee and tea and wine. I'd never see Carolyn like this again. Living what it meant to be a friend.

Before we left, I looked for Walter. I couldn't help it. He stood in a cluster of men near the front door. I tapped his shoulder and he turned toward me. His mask was up.

"It was really good to see you, Jessa. Thank you again for coming," he said, polite in that way you talk nice to any ordinary person who's come to your mother's funeral, only because it's the proper thing to do. Still, I looked at his gray-green eyes, searching. He blinked at me in return. Then, Hank opened the exit door, and I followed him through.

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