

“For Better or For Worse”  
by May Cotton © 2024

She sat on the toilet reading. It was the only place she could get any privacy. Between their curious pets and her demented husband, she had learned to lock the door when she wanted to be alone. The animals followed her everywhere, even into her bed at night. She wished they would pay more attention to the man, to sleep in his bed instead of hers, but he no longer remembered to feed them or love them, pet them or talk to them. He only talked to her, demanding more and more often to know what she was doing and when she was going to provide for him: make the beds, make the meals; clean the kitchen, clean the clothes; shovel the dog poop, shovel the snow. There was a lawn to water and mow in the months when there wasn't snow. She longed for the days when she was still teaching. She longed to read their papers and banter with her students, newly enlightened by the topics she urged on them.

Retirement was certainly not at all what she had expected. She thought there would be travel and adventures with her man, but almost as soon as he had joined her in retirement, he slipped into depression and then dementia. He was no longer the charming partner with whom she had danced nights away while chaperoning school dances on weekends, and sharing the stories her seniors were writing as she graded their papers. Together they had laughed at the angst the teens expressed and reminisced about their own youthful ideas.

Now he shuffled around the house, lost and afraid, lethargic and angry at his partially-functioning mind. She wanted to leave him, but she could not bear to leave him alone, knowing he would quickly deteriorate even farther. She had to be responsible because she was now responsible for him. She fed him and dressed him and set him in front of the TV, then escaped to the bathroom where she took a quick shower and read as long as possible.

But soon he was pounding on the door, demanding she open it so he could see he was not alone. It didn't seem to matter what she said or how loudly she shouted to let him know she'd be right out—he continued to pound. This angry man outside the bathroom door held little resemblance to the kind, sweet man with whom she had fallen in love all those years ago.

She had taken the bad advice offered in a magazine article and purchased a large fish tank, filling it with a beautiful array of fish, hoping the aquarium would entertain him for hours, as it had soothed the people in the nursing home she'd read about. But he couldn't seem to concentrate on the fish long enough to settle down and watch them, and she was left with the added tasks of feeding the fish and cleaning the tank. As she carried out those tasks, he watched her carefully, standing too close and getting in her way.

She had tried playing music to calm him, but no matter what songs she tried, he screamed about the “incessant noise.” She was at her wits' end, sometimes wishing he would

just die, but knowing she could not survive financially without his social security added to hers. She had looked in to putting him in a home but quickly learned that she would first have to deplete their assets; then the home would take his social security, leaving her with only her own and the meager pension she received from the private school where she had taught.

The “if onlys” haunted her. If only she had gotten a teaching credential so she could work in public schools, which paid better and had better retirements plans (though she knew the job was harder, the students less cooperative). If only her husband had not retired, not come down with dementia, not become the raving maniac he sometimes seemed. If only they had saved more, spent less, realized they would need far more money for retirement than they had amassed.

Before she started teaching, she had taken in ironing, but the advent of wrinkle-free fabrics had put an end to that. She’d tried tutoring, but was unable to convince enough parents that she was perfectly capable of helping their children without having gotten herself a college degree. Now as a retired teacher, she could take up tutoring again—if only she had the time. But her husband took all the time and energy she could muster. There was no time left for anything but caring for him, and she was exhausted.

At night when he was sleeping, she spent hours digging through old files, searching for insurance policies, but so far there were none. She knew he had purchased more than one, but gradually she came across receipts showing he had sold them, one by one. *To do what?* she wondered. *Had there been a paramour? Had he gambled the money away?* Eventually she found old stock certificates, investments in companies that had failed. *Why hadn’t he bought gold or silver?* she wondered. Those at least seemed more secure than betting on the stock market. *And when had he become so secretive about money?*

When he was awake, she focused on trying to keep him content. She’d given up on trying to keep him happy. Finally, in desperation, she had taken him to the doctor and begged for help. But the doctor was an old man just like her husband and seemed a bit demented himself. He offered no meds or rehab, only suggesting she take her husband to familiar places to see if that would jog his memory. The only place close enough was the school where she had taught—the cost of gas was out of sight, and the tires were nearly bald. Viewing the building and the inside of the gym had no impact, so she returned to her seemingly futile search.

That night after they’d returned to the school, she had dreamed they were preparing to go to the prom, both dressed to the nines, she in an off-the-shoulder low-cut red ball gown. As they stood together before the mirror, she burst into tears. There was a multitude of ugly red acne all over her chest, just like that one poor girl in her freshman English class ten years ago. *Or perhaps it was chicken pox or shingles,* she pondered the next morning as she remember the dream. Whatever it was, it was certainly ominous.

*Where on earth had all the money gone?* she asked herself when she looked at their bank balance. It seemed to have just drained away, though the draining appeared to have stopped shortly after he retired.

*Was he drinking again?* she wondered. She remembered a couple of decades back when she had asked that question after smelling alcohol on his breath one morning at breakfast. He seemed surprised and assured her he hadn't had a drink in years, not since his ulcer had acted up and he'd had to change his diet. That time when she'd taken him to the doctor, much younger and more with it then, they learned her husband had diabetes; it was that which accounted for the smell of alcohol. Once he was on insulin, the odor had gone away. The cost on insulin was out of sight these days, making her wonder if she should just stop giving it to him and let him die. But no, in memory of the man he once had been, she wanted to keep him around a little longer.

So she continued searching through the paperwork, until at last she found a receipt for a safe deposit box. She had not known about that and set about looking for the key. After a few days, she found it at the bottom of his dresser drawer, hidden in a small box buried under the shirts and sweaters he no longer wore. She asked a neighbor to sit with him while she dashed to the bank. Once there she learned that he and he alone could open the box. Unless, of course, he died and she was his executor. They lived in a community property state, and she knew he had no will.

At last she decided the only solution was to take him to the bank. Maybe he would be able to sign his name and could give them permission to put her name on the account. Much to her relief, he recognized the bank and was more than willing to follow her suggestion. After her name was added to the account, they entered the vault together. There the bank clerk opened the double-keyed door behind which lay the mysterious safe deposit box.

As she began to pull the box from its slot, he put his hands on hers and said, "Here, let me. It's very heavy." Setting the box on the counter where it could be opened, he pulled off the lid and showed her what he had been hiding all these years. Inside the small narrow box were six gold bars and a thick stack of \$100 bills.

She put her hand over his and gently pulled his face towards hers so they could look into each others' eyes. "It was supposed to be a surprise," he whispered. "I was going to tell you on our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary."

"That was three years ago," she told him. "You've been lost in your mind for a long time."

"Well, happy anniversary, darling," he responded, as he dropped her hand and clutched his chest. She stood stunned as his heart stopped and he fell to the floor dying.