

## A Touch of Dementia

Nathan was ninety and wanted to live to one hundred. He lived by himself in the same Boston apartment he'd inhabited for fifty-seven years, including the past eight years since his wife died. When Jean left he felt he couldn't go on, but somehow he kept living. The first year was the hardest but eventually it passed and to his surprise he began to make a life for himself without her.

It was the little things that bothered him the most. He missed having coffee ready for him when he woke. Even though Nathan had never asked Jean to do this, he felt grateful for this small act of love, which endured until she fell ill. For the final six months of her life Nathan made coffee and breakfast for her, for as long as she could eat. Each day during these final months Jean would react with surprise when Nathan presented her with a steaming cup of coffee at the breakfast table.

"My dear," she would say, "how very nice of you."

"My pleasure," he would respond, as he patted her on the shoulder. "We shall both live very long lives."

But he knew the doctors had said she was terminal. The word made Nathan cringe. Whoever thought of using that word for humans? It seemed a travesty.

As things turned out the doctors were right. No matter what Nathan or anyone else wished to call Jean's condition, she slowly slipped away. At times Nathan felt he was living a horrible dream, his feet immensely heavy as he tried to drag himself away from some dark, ominous thing.

Jean had her good days and her bad days, and Nathan was grateful for each lucid hour. But he couldn't escape the fact she was dying before his eyes and there was nothing he could do about it. The day Jean died, Nathan felt as if time had stopped. A Touch of

Then something odd happened. He couldn't explain it, even to himself. He felt like one of those bubbles clowns blow out of a ring, which floats now upwards now down, eventually popping with a splash. He was floating in one of these bubbles, watching the world go by without feeling part of it and not really caring. He felt this way at the hospital during Jean's final hours, then again at the funeral, as if the person he had shared a bed with for fifty-seven years had never existed. He wondered if he was losing his mind.

At the funeral the rabbi did his best to put a positive spin on things by recounting Jean's long life, that she'd been a loving wife to Nathan, that while they had no children she'd made their home a place of comfort and peace, that she loved animals and had fostered many cats and dogs until they were adopted. Among her many admirable qualities was her calm in the face of storms, including the winter of sixty-seven when their house burned down because of faulty wiring. Throughout the terrible event Jean had maintained a sense of faith that all would be well, and in the end it was. Yet throughout the service and the burial, then as weeks passed into months, Nathan was bothered by thoughts that kept him awake at night or popped into his head as he was washing the dishes or taking out the trash: What if there's nothing when the body stops living? What was it all for, all those years, even if they were mostly happy? To have such thoughts at his age didn't seem fair.

He remembered one winter just three months after they were married when a tremendous storm dropped feet of snow and no one went to work for a week. He and Jean spent the week in their rented apartment listening to the radio and making love twice, even three times a day. Nathan recalled these blissful days with a sense of sadness. He felt he'd been cheated. Life hadn't been easy at times and like all couples they'd had ups and downs. Jean had a series of miscarriages in their early years and as much as they wanted children something always seemed to go wrong. Each time after getting their hopes up they would lose the child, and after the fourth time they decided it was simply too painful to continue and resigned themselves to being a couple without children.

In the end they adjusted but occasionally there were uncomfortable moments at parties and social events when people would ask silly questions.

“Why don’t you have children?”

Nathan would become irritated. “What business is it of theirs anyway?” he would ask Jean.

They would nearly always add something like “Of course children are a lot of trouble, but I can’t imagine life without them” or some such nonsense.

Jean usually calmed him by saying, “It’s okay, dear. They’re just being friendly,” or “No harm done. They just want to know us a little better.” And she was right. Most people meant no harm, but Nathan still felt they were intruding.

Since Jean died, thoughts came uninvited into Nathan’s head, some pleasing, others disturbing, and still others causing him to drift into a strange state where he wasn’t sure he was alive. He imagined himself in a sensory deprivation tank, hallucinating after fifteen minutes without hearing, sight or the sensation of touch. Jean’s absence was causing his mind to run amok like an unruly child.

One evening as he was watering his lawn he recalled the time he and Jean had gone to Puerto Rico in January to escape the bitter winter cold. They ended up in a sparsely furnished little hotel called the Hacienda in San Juan. Their room was nothing more than four bare walls, with a small tiled bathroom and shower heated by a box with a wire running into it near the showerhead, which scared him. The family running the place, he even remembered their names, Elena and Hector Sanchez and their three children, were kind. Their hospitality made up for the mild discomfort of the sparse lodgings, and Elena’s meals, Nathan recalled, were wonderful.

The week in Puerto Rico was enjoyable, a welcome respite from New England’s cold, messy winter snow. But one thing stuck in Nathan’s mind. On the third morning he and Jean set out for a beach popular with tourists. It was about an hour and a half by bus up the coast.

After forty-five minutes on the road, the bus got a flat tire that took the driver nearly an hour to repair. He and Jean sat on the bus holding hands, waiting patiently, when suddenly he had a premonition of death, Jean’s or his own, he couldn’t tell. About twenty yards from the bus was an enormous gnarled mango tree heavy with fruit, which when Nathan blinked turned into severed heads swinging in the early morning breeze. He blinked and they were mangoes again, hundreds of them, ripe and waiting to be picked and eaten. Nathan told Jean he needed some air, got out of the bus and walked over to the mango tree. It was large with a hefty trunk three arm spans across, at least one hundred and fifty years old. When he returned to the bus he took Jean’s hand, held it tightly and told her he loved her.

“Yes, dear, and I you,” she replied.

Nathan didn’t tell Jean about his vision, nor did he tell her that evening when he looked into the mirror that he felt fear. Mirrors had scared him since he was six years old, yet for some reason he was drawn to them as well. On this occasion while Jean was reading Nathan stared into the mirror, first fleetingly as he washed his face and brushed his teeth, then squarely, facing the mirror, looking at himself staring back.

He had the sensation he was falling and nearly lost his balance. His face looked strange; he wasn’t sure anymore who he was looking at. With a grimace Nathan turned away and, touching his face, shut off the bathroom light. He climbed into bed where Jean was quietly waiting for him. It was early but it had been a tiring and eventful day. Jean fell asleep soon after her head hit the pillow. Nathan lay in bed shifting position, trying to get comfortable until he finally drifted off. While Jean slept soundly, Nathan woke every couple hours, reaching over to touch her lightly as she slept to make sure she was still there. He listened to her rhythmic breathing, feeling the warmth of her body.

At four in the morning Nathan woke to the sound of rain pelting the hotel window. As Jean slept on, he lay there in the dark listening to the tapping, which came in waves as the rain was blown this way and that. Nathan felt comforted by the pleasing sound. It was in such moments that the entirety of existence shrunk down to the small space he occupied. He felt as if whatever was wrong with the world didn’t matter, for a time at least. Years before, his father had taken him and his brother camping, and as they

sat around the fire his father told them how primeval people would sit gazing into the fire, seeing in it wonderful and fearful powers. They too could feel fire's hypnotic draw. So it is with rain, Nathan thought, this wonderful translucent liquid.

The rain in Puerto Rico was unlike anything he'd experienced in the north. Maybe it was the earthy scent of tropical vegetation that seemed to drink in the wetness. In the morning quiet before the sun rose, Nathan peeked through the blinds. Mist was rising from the damp ground. He felt something at his back and turned to see Jean sitting next to him. This was the day Jean told him more about her first marriage to a Marine who had died in Iwo Jima. He'd known about it since they'd started dating but had never asked details; it seemed too delicate a thing to talk about.

In their early days as a couple, they were in the habit of going to a late movie then sitting in a diner until the small hours of the morning. It was one of these times after they finished coffee and pie that Jean looked over at Nathan and hesitated for a moment.

"I have something to tell you," she said placing her left hand over his. "I hope it doesn't change things for us." And then she told him that she'd been married to a young man in the fall of 1943.

"It all happened so quickly. We met when he already had his orders to ship out to the Pacific, so we decided to marry before he left. Everyone knew what being sent into battle meant, though no one could imagine the horrid truth of it at that time. Stories were being told about what our boys were facing, but in those days the government did its best to hide the details. It didn't want to discourage young men from enlisting."

This was a part of Jean's life she wanted to forget, but as time went by she realized she owed it to Nathan to give him some details about the man she'd been married to before she and Nathan met. It seemed more like a story she'd read or seen in a film than a chapter in her life, but in the end she decided to let Nathan into this secret part of her life. In a way there wasn't all that much to tell.

Three weeks after they married, Chuck left for the Pacific and she never saw him again. He would send letters as often as he could, letters full of plans for what they would do when he returned. Buy a small house, have children, travel. In short, enjoy the life they were entitled to that was cut short by the war. What wasn't in Chuck's letters were specifics about what he was doing and where he was. The enlisted boys, especially the ones in combat, had to be careful not to reveal anything the enemy could use.

Every so often he would hint at hardships he'd encountered or mention one of his fellow soldiers who had died. But beyond saying he missed home cooking and sleeping in his own bed, Jean was left to imagine what he was going through—and what she imagined made her shudder. She read the newspaper, heard radio reports and saw the occasional newsreel, and realized some of the things Chuck wasn't mentioning. On February 12, 1945, she received his last letter. It was dated January 3. Chuck said they were preparing for something big but he couldn't say what or where it was, only that if anything happened to him he loved her and hoped the war would be over soon. Two months later Jean received word Chuck had died on the fifth day of the amphibious assault on Iwo Jima. The details were vague but, according to the report from the Marines, on February 23 he was killed when the 3rd Marine Division tried to take the northern part of the island, whose rocky terrain favored the Japanese defenders. Chuck's body was never found.

In the years that followed, they seldom discussed this part of Jean's life, yet it was there as a vague presence. Simply knowing Jean had this experience made Nathan wonder what his life would have been had Chuck not died and he not met Jean. Hard as he tried he couldn't imagine it; he and Jean seemed perfectly suited. Eight months after Jean died, Nathan decided to begin going through her things, something he hadn't been able to bring himself to do before.

Mostly there were financial records, credit card receipts, phone numbers, indecipherable notes scribbled in longhand, birthday and holiday cards, knickknacks, even coupons from the local supermarket and sale advertisements for Kohl's. Going through Jean's things gave Nathan a queasy feeling.

Shortly after she died, Nathan had gone through the house and everywhere there were traces of Jean. Places like the bathroom where her toothbrush, shampoo, comb, makeup and lipstick sat exactly where

she had last placed them. How strange it was to see these things when the person who used them was no longer breathing. For a moment Nathan felt he shouldn't touch these things, that he should leave them exactly where they were, that disturbing them was an insult to the memory of Jean. Sweeping away these things seemed the most natural thing to do and the most painful. It was the banality of it that hurt Nathan the most.

Some of the things were Jean's most-prized possessions, such as her inlaid jewelry box from their trip to New Mexico or her favorite dresses.

"I could console myself by saying I'm guarding them for safekeeping," Nathan thought.

But clearing away Jean's socks, her beauty supplies, even the box of tissues she kept beside the easy chair in the living room meant only she would never need these things again. Nathan cried as he wiped the bathroom sink, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, a wrinkled old man with tear-stained cheeks.

That evening after watching the news, Nathan settled into bed. Lying there he felt the urge to examine his body. He held his hands out in front of himself and looked at his palms. They had deep lines and folds, smooth to the touch with the occasional callus from gardening. He recalled how when he was small, his mom, who died of an aneurism when he was twenty-four, would take him by the hand and they would make their daily trek to the corner grocery store. In those days, before the war, people still shopped for fresh meat and vegetables in the morning while the man of the house was at work.

Memories flooded Nathan's mind as if they happened yesterday, the passage of time a chimera taunting him and making him believe he could still feel the tight, warm grip of his mother's hand in his. The past came back with such vividness he could smell, even taste the damp morning air, and the faint acrid scent from the neighbor's coal furnace. His mind wandered over the landscape of his early years, before he had married, indeed before he had the faintest sense of his purpose on earth, if indeed he had any.

As the days passed Nathan found himself daydreaming at unpredictable moments. He'd be watching television or cooking when he'd drift off and see things, vivid things, as if he was experiencing what he was seeing. This worried him. He nearly started a fire on the stove frying sausages one morning when he drifted off. Afterwards he was especially careful while cooking.

On one occasion he saw the face of a young woman with an infant in her arms entering then leaving a strange-looking house sitting in the middle of marshy land with something green growing in the shallow water. The sky was a deep blue and the ocean lay in the distance. The woman worked in the field, bending over with the baby tied to her back in a way he'd never seen before. As best he could tell he lived in the house as well. He wanted nothing more than to stay there with his young wife and child for the rest of his life. At the same time he knew he couldn't and a deep sadness came upon him. He knew something would separate him from his young wife and child and he would never see them again. It was a sorrow almost too great for him to bear. He felt the wind blow across his face and prayed he would see his family again in another life.

After three weeks of this Nathan began to see other things. To his relief this now happened when he was resting in his easy chair in the living room or in the evening as he was lying in bed getting ready to sleep. Nathan wasn't disturbed by the things he was seeing. Jean's face would appear before him, pretty as she'd ever been, with wavy auburn hair cut just above her shoulders, kind and inquisitive eyes the color of opals, her mouth upturned at the edges in a hint of a smile, anticipating something. Other times she would appear as a middle-aged woman, still handsome, or later in life when she had turned grey and grown a few wrinkles. However she appeared, Nathan was happy to see her and usually slept well. Yet each time this happened he had the feeling she wanted to tell him something.

Truth to tell, while Nathan attended synagogue as a child, once he grew into adulthood he stopped going to Sabbath service, first because he was too busy with work, later simply because he wasn't very religious. Belief in God was another thing though. Over the years Nathan wavered between a believer and

a doubter. When Jean was dying he wished he could believe in a compassionate God but found it hard. He wasn't angry at God. No, that wasn't it. He simply didn't feel anything there.

Religious sentiment, he'd once read, is born into us, some of us in any case. It must have been helpful for our survival when we were still digging in the ground for roots and scavenging trees for fruit and nuts. Nathan didn't know if he was lucky or unlucky to find himself among those who don't see evidence of God. He felt that religious people got it wrong when they thought non-believers were atheists or worse. It wasn't an insult or a deliberate rejection; it was simply something that seemed baked into him.

The closest he'd ever come to religious sentiment was reading poems in his younger years. There was a poem he'd once read, though he couldn't recall the author or title, that expressed how he felt when he was lonely. It seemed to fit his mood after Jean died.

The sun sets in the cold without friends  
Without reproaches after all it has done for us  
It goes down believing in nothing  
When it is gone I hear the stream running after it  
It has brought its flute it is a long way

In recalling these lines Nathan thought of the summer he'd spent at an old country farmhouse in a small town in Vermont when he was fifteen years old. That was when the idea of being someone with a particular purpose in life was a distant idea, abstract, no more bothersome than a fly one brushes away with the swat of a hand. That summer he'd taken hikes exploring woods and fields nearby and drank from the cold, clear stream running by the house. A small rock dam made a swimming hole and a pipe upstream caught water for cooking and drinking. If Nathan could pinpoint a time when he felt truly alive, it was that summer. His senses seemed most acute, and life was a palate of pleasurable sensations, scents, tastes, radiant colors and hues of all sorts. Even the old farmhouse had its delights, with its musty smells and myriad nooks and crannies to explore.

At night he would lie in the dark of his room, listening to the rhythmic chirr of crickets, and catch glimpses of the pale green glow of fireflies flitting past the window. He'd wonder what the world held for him. He'd been floating through life as if on a wide river, going wherever the current took him, and so far it had been pleasant enough. But he was getting near the age when choices had to be made, as his elders were so fond of telling him. Soon he would be a man. Lying there he couldn't decide if this was something he should welcome or fear. It meant having to be someone.

When Nathan was ninety-five he began to feel he could no longer care for himself. His visits with Jean had become a regular thing and most of the time she was there waiting for him when he came in from collecting the mail. Oftentimes she would sit in the cane chair next to him when he spent time on the enclosed porch. He tried to keep it exactly as it was when Jean was alive, with plants and a couple of pots with indoor flowers to add a bit of color.

On December 5 Nathan awoke and knew, but of course he'd have to consult with Jean first. He had his usual breakfast of buttered toast, half an orange and black coffee then shuffled out to the porch where Jean was waiting for him with a smile. This time she didn't say anything though Nathan saw she understood. In his sleeveless undershirt and pajama bottoms Nathan rose, unlocked the porch door, looked back at Jean, and stepped out onto the cement steps.

It was twenty-seven degrees but Nathan didn't feel cold at all. In fact he felt as if a warm fire engulfed his body, starting from his feet and slowly moving up his legs into his torso and then finally his chest, arms and head. As he stood there Nathan felt happy. He recalled things: a nursery rhyme he'd learned when he was a small child, his first bicycle, a two-wheeler with training wheels, and the winter snow covering the front of his parents' house. After twenty minutes Nathan went back in and sat on the couch at the far end of the porch. After five minutes, he removed his slippers and lay down with his head on a throw pillow,

waiting. He sang songs, petted ponies at the zoo with his parents and shoveled coal into the family furnace while Jean patted his forehead with a damp cloth.

In his delirium someone placed a blanket over him and gave him sips of water. As he wavered in and out of consciousness, he caught a glimpse of his younger brother who died of scarlet fever, then the sky so filled with stars it took his breath away. At sundown a fiery orb glowed furnace red, followed by a pale white quarter moon. Nathan, son of Jacob and Sarah, husband of Jean, lighter than a feather, left his body.