

## *The Painting*

**T**he flowers were frozen. The petals had faded, stems drooped, and a dusting of new-fallen snow covered the arrangement. The florist had placed them on the front step, obviously expecting that there would be someone home to bring them inside. I saw them out of the corner of my eye as I pulled into the driveway.

The outside house lights were not on. Of course they weren't; who would have turned them on? He always turned the lights on just before it got dark.

As I looked at the light fixtures, I thought about how much work had gone into renovating our two-hundred year old antique home: the home where we would spend our retirement. We had been particular about every detail, including hiring a Cape Cod craftsman to design the lights that were guaranteed for life. I remem-

bered how impressed I was with the promise “guaranteed for life.” I now almost chuckled at the gallows humor. Instead, I kept staring at the house.

The front windows, which at night used to glow like eyes, were dark, but I could still see the lighted church steeple across the street reflected in the living room window. For several months during that last year, an owl had taken up residence in the steeple. I thought his hoots were mournful. But he sang at night, which I, at least, found comforting, because I had heard that if you hear an owl during the day, it is bad luck.

We’d had enough bad luck.

Fearing an owl hooting during the day was easier to think about than it was to truly hear the words spoken in doctors’ offices, starting with the diagnosis that I suspected had been delivered too late.

I sat in the car for several minutes, summoning the strength to go inside. I wanted to stay in the car, but I was getting cold.

Twilight faded; it was now dark. I clutched the keys in my hand and walked slowly to the door. The light snow made the walk and steps slippery. I paused by the frozen flowers. I considered taking them inside. Instead, I took the card. By the light of the church steeple I saw that my niece had sent the flowers as a thoughtful gesture.

Just as I opened the door, the church bells rang three times. “Three bells,” I could hear my husband saying, “three bells — it’s 5:30.” The church was one of the few in the country that rang its bells in nautical time.

The sound of the chimes was replaced with the beeping of our alarm system warning me that I had seconds to enter the code, the four digits of our birth years.

The house was cold. I had been gone for two weeks arranging the final farewell. Before I left, I had turned down the thermostat to 50 degrees, following our house rules. Against the rules, I turned up the thermostat to 80 degrees to heat up the house quickly. Then I turned on the lights.

The emptiness was exposed now. I thought to myself, "What could I have done to prepare myself for the shock of being in this dark house alone?" Rather than think about the answer, I reverted to what had become my way of dealing with piercing emotion: I turned away from it.

I left the house and went back outside to get my suitcase. I walked carefully, but I nearly fell on the newly painted red steps. Several months before, we had painted the steps and the front door red. Ancient Chinese believed that the color red drove away misfortune. In my muddled state, I had believed that if we painted the steps and door red, everything would be all right.

I had few coping mechanisms at the time. Mythology was easier to grasp than were the doctors' predictions. Painting the door and the steps red was a cruel hoax played on a weary mind struggling to remain hopeful. We were fixated on hope.

I pulled my suitcase out of the car, and carried it to the front door. This suitcase was filled with black clothes that I would probably give away. I had a habit of giving away any clothes I'd worn when we received bad news.

When I got in the house, I locked the front door and set the suitcase down in the hall. I didn't have the strength to carry it to our bedroom. The word "our" stuck in my head like a dagger. Our house had become my house, and this new reality petrified me.

As I had done so often in the past four years, I slammed the door shut in my brain. Sometimes I imagined that a box inside my brain held my terror so tightly that my fears would never escape. The box was bursting as I stood in the hall of this cold and dark house. Some believe that love and hate are closely aligned. I never understood that; now I did. I loved this house, and now I had begun to hate it.

As I stood in the hall, trying to numb my brain from the siege of emotions, I felt new terrors. I was alone and vulnerable, and I was scared. A young mother had been murdered weeks before in the small Cape Cod town of Truro, one town beyond Wellfleet. The story had made national news. It was a particularly brutal murder, the first in Truro in many decades; no suspects had been arrested.

"Don't worry, you'll be safe." An echo was speaking.

Again, I questioned how I could have prepared myself for my return to the house. Should I have removed all the furniture? If I had, I would not have had to look at the dining room table and pictured family and friends gathered around it as we laughed away the inevitable sadness that hung around us like a clinging spider web.

I would not have seen the two chairs in front of the fireplace — I called it our winter bistro — one of which would now remain permanently empty. The gentleman's

chair was his chair in the small room where we watched television. What should I do with that?

“Come watch this touchdown,” the echo was speaking again.

I had so much to learn. In an attempt to see my future, I would write in my journal. It held my sadness and my secrets. One particularly scary night, I crept downstairs, never waking him, and lit a candle. I sat down in one of the bistro chairs. I couldn't find my journal, but I found a small notebook I'd left on the kitchen counter that contained healthy recipes I had collected for my husband. I turned to the first empty page and, with a shaky hand, started to write. I poured my breaking heart onto these pages, for the first time admitting that the battle was probably lost.

I wrote for several hours. I pried open just a crack in the box in my head, letting out my deepest fears. I remember the date, December 16, 2001, a day that would live in my personal infamy. I had let out two unthinkable truths: The first was that my husband's courageous battle was nearly over. The second was that soon I would be learning to live alone, something I had never done in 55 years. The admissions were too much. I ripped out the pages, rumbled them in a tight little ball and quietly buried them in the kitchen rubbish bin.

Now, standing in the house, I was beginning to experience the learning-to-live-alone truth written that dark night as I took in the stark emptiness around me.

I was alone, but the house was full, crammed with memories, accentuating how empty it was.

We had filled the house with love. We had honored its past. We had carefully restored it, so that we could spend our retirement years here, creating our own history. The house was situated on top of one of the highest hills in Wellfleet on the outer Cape. We were told by a local historian that it was originally built on one of the islands in Wellfleet but the owner was fearful of flood tides, so he had the original structure moved by a team of horses to the highest point in town.

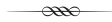
The house was safe. I tried to breathe in that comfort, as my eyes took in the bleakness that surrounded me. I mused, "Can this house protect me and make me feel safe again?"

I was exhausted so I forced myself to climb the stairs to the bedroom. When I walked in, I felt exposed. All the shades were up.

I went to the window overlooking Main Street and saw a man walking on the sidewalk. It was Wellfleet and it was winter; the sidewalks were normally empty, especially at night. He looked up. Did he see me? I yanked down the shade thinking, "Could this be the killer of the young mother?" At the same time, I wondered if these thoughts were going to become a part of my new life — being suspicious of any stranger walking on the sidewalk after dark.

I raced to reset the alarm and asked the house to keep me safe. Had I fooled myself? I thought the house, our retirement home, situated between an historic church and a harbor, would be my sanctuary. Instead, the house was chilled by love lost, darkened by loneliness, tainted by terror, and filled with dreams sabotaged.

I felt frozen by fear; I questioned whether I would ever again be happy in this house, a place where my husband's voice was an echo and his face a mirage. The house was the embodiment of him. Was it possible to integrate myself into it? Would the house accept just me?



My husband died on January 31, 2002, just as the new year had begun.

My melancholy made me question whether all of my new years would be cursed. I thought coming back to our house would make me stronger. Instead, it made me feel weak.

I worked hard over the next several months to make friends with the house. But each day we quarreled. I moved furniture and put away photographs. I tried to preserve the past, but pushed the house into the present. It wouldn't budge. I couldn't make the house happy.

I tried to ignore the fact that the house controlled my life. I began each day trying to win its favor. How did this contest begin? Who was in charge? The house had an unhealthy hold on me. As much as my heart ached, missing my husband, I began to realize that I could not live in his shrine.

I sometimes went to a Wellfleet coffee shop at the crack of dawn, trying to figure out if I could fit into this town. It was late February. Wellfleet's population fluctuates dramatically from summer to winter. After Columbus Day, there is almost a seismic whoosh of people exiting, shops closing, and traffic dwindling.

The winters are desolate. If you have a companion to share the fireside, it is hardly noticeable. If you don't, being alone can be crushing. I had returned home alone to Wellfleet in winter.

I came to the Outer Cup coffee shop to be with people and to hear the locals banter. I would sit alone at a table with my journal, drinking coffee, and writing. While my husband and I owned a house in Wellfleet, we were not members of the community. We had created our own community with family and friends.

One morning, I walked into the coffee shop and noticed a beautiful watercolor painting by Traci Harmon (Traci Harmon-Hay) that had just been hung in the entrance; it was for sale. The image was of the town of Wellfleet bathed in an ice blue with our house in the center.

Above the town was a floating house, its windows glowing with warmth. The contrast between the beautiful little floating house and the icy stillness of the town below struck me instantly. I saw my husband in the floating house — safe, warm, peaceful and happy. My mind went inside the house and pictured him in this new place; I even imagined him sitting and warming himself by the fireplace that made the windows glow.

The painting forced me to see that my husband had moved away from me. He had a new house. This remarkable painting also made me see that I was not free. I was in our house, frozen and captive.

The title of the painting was "Above Wellfleet." I bought it. It had given me a personal epiphany. It is the painting on the cover of this book.



Months later, against most advice, I startled family and friends by selling the house. It was a decision viewed by some that I was selling a piece of my husband. They were right. He was an integral part of the house. This painting, however, allowed me to understand that he no longer lived there, nor did his spirit.

As I drove out of the driveway for the last time, clutching the steering wheel, surprisingly I did not cry. I was sad thinking about what could have been, but I concentrated on believing that my husband had a new home, and I was headed to mine.