



## Respite from the Storm

Alzheimer's disease is slowly taking away my husband. There are still times when he returns and I remember what a magical love story Fred and I have lived for more than twenty years, though.

It's Writer's Club night. We meet for dinner at the Chowder Bowl and then move on to the library for our program. Fred, who volunteers at the Oregon Coast Aquarium, will join us at the restaurant after his shift.

The rain has finally stopped its attack. After pounding, pouring, flooding, and gusting for days, the air is still and a patch of palest blue peeks out of the white-gray clouds. As I turn onto the Coast Highway, I see the bottom of the sun hanging from a cloud like a yellow-gold Easter egg. As I drive, I keep looking west. Now there's the whole sun, stenciled with black Chinese characters.

Parking at the Nye Beach turnaround, I hurry to where I can see the horizon. Now the top of the Easter egg pokes up where the sea meets the sky. I have three minutes before I'm late to dinner, but I must watch as the sun slowly shrinks to a hyphen, then disappears. Tonight, instead of thinking, *Oh, it's gone, and now we will be immersed in darkness for the next fifteen hours*, I think about how the sun has gone to shine for someone else.

What does this have to do with Fred? Light. Hope. A respite from the storm. We have had some dark days lately—days when the man I loved was gone, replaced by a ghost who got lost in the middle of the night and stared at his cereal in the morning as if he didn't know what it was. But now, as I stand in that parking lot and inhale the sweet ocean air, I stretch and feel strong and alive from boots to fingertips. We will be all right.

At the Chowder Bowl, two newcomers are waiting. In a minute, my friend Carol arrives. Then our speaker, Cynthia, joins us, shaking hands all around. "I love this place," she says. "Did you see that sunset?"

Because it's winter and the tourists are gone, we have the restaurant to ourselves. We claim the big table in the corner.

As we talk, I keep looking out the window for Fred, relieved when I see our blue Mazda pickup

glide by on its way to the parking lot. Midday, his stomach bothered him. He has been having some accidents lately, and I thought I might be called to the aquarium to bring clean pants. Then, despite the note I gave him, I worried he might forget about the meeting and sit at the house wondering where I was.

But here he is, all jingling aquarium badges. And he's handsome in his royal blue sweatshirt. As far as anyone can tell, I'm the woman with the greatest husband.

Carol knows of his illness but says nothing, just gives him a big hug. Cynthia may remember hearing about it, but the others have no idea and there's no need to mention it.

The waitress swings by. "Cannonball?" That's clam chowder in a big bread bowl with a shrimp salad on the side, Fred's usual. Menus confuse him, so he always orders the same thing.

"Yes. And coffee."

"Dressing?"

"Honey mustard." Usually, he says "um" and looks at me to finish the order, but tonight he remembers.

We eat and talk, our conversation dominated by the strangers, Suzy and Ron, mostly Suzy, who has taken too many writing workshops and goes on and on about them. Carol counters with stories about her workshops. Cynthia smiles indulgently. I watch

my husband. Fred, who is not a writer, quietly listens and enjoys his chowder.

Eventually, the subject changes. It turns out that most of us are from California, and we discover that Fred and Suzy attended the same junior high and high schools in Burbank. Suzy was one year behind Fred. She names lots of names. Do you know . . . ? And he actually does know some of them. He's excited, speaking clearly. Alzheimer's destroys short-term memory, but his long-term memory is fine.

When the checks come, Fred silently slides ours over to me, and I figure out the tip, but he takes the money to the cash register.

By the time the rest of us get to the library, Fred and Carol are already there. Fred comes into the meeting room bearing paperbacks from the freebie shelf, hands them to me, and gets busy setting up the blue plastic chairs. He's a handy part of the team, my muscles.

I'm running the meeting, so I sit up front. Fred and Carol giggle in the back. The room fills to the point where I start wondering whether we'll run out of chairs, but we have just enough. After I do the intros, Cynthia jumps up and starts talking. Her style is fast and funny. In a minute, she has us on the ladder of humanity, from animalistic to Godlike, warning that, if the characters don't move on that

ladder, nobody's going to be interested in the story. She describes cycles of creativity and tells secrets about selling scripts in Hollywood.

Cynthia has worked with famous producers, directors, and actors. She has been nominated for an Emmy. Yet, she's nobody's idea of a Hollywood shaker—not young, skinny, or stylish. She has a slew of grown children she raised alone, and she recently lost her mother to Alzheimer's. Through it all, she has lived the dream, and everyone in the room wants to do the same.

Now and then, I glance back and see Fred listening, smiling, laughing. God, he's mine. I am so lucky.

When the writer's meeting is over, Fred and the Depoe Bay postmaster stow the furniture back in the closet while the crowd trickles away. Nearly alone, I grab my husband for a long, sweet hug and kiss. I don't care if anyone sees us.

"I love you. I'm so glad you came," I tell him, and I mean it.

"It was fun," he says, and he means it.

He shouldn't be driving at night, but it isn't far and we take the chance. I follow him, grateful it's not raining.

As I watch Fred drive smoothly south on Highway 101, I think about how well he's doing. His

official diagnosis was two years ago Saturday. Symptoms appeared three years before that. Yet, he is still driving, still volunteering at the aquarium, still able to show up and make my friends think I nabbed the best husband around. Tonight I have a partner, and it feels good.

Whatever happens in the future, I lucked out. We have had the kind of love most people never find. We have traveled the world together. Fred has supported me well, and he has always been my biggest fan. I am blessed, even if the ghost returns before the sun comes up, even if the next storm threatens to tear the roof off the house.

—Sue Fagalde Lick