

Unexpected Knowledge

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“No, it’s not me. I’m tired of you blaming everyone and everything for what’s not going right in your life,” screamed Peggy as she went into the bedroom and slammed the door. He heard a click of the deadbolt lock.

A moment of quiet and then, “You’re the one always telling me what’s right when I’m just a pawn,” Robbie yelled through the door. Then he paused, didn’t hear a sound from the room.

“Fine, cut me off. That’s how you solve all our problems, just slamming a door on it all. I’m going for a walk.” With that, Robbie stormed out the back door grabbing his jacket on this chilly October day.

Robert Forester looked older than his thirty-five years, and this was not the first of a series of arguments with his wife of seven years, Peggy. Things had not been going well the past few years, and he found reasons to blame others for his misfortunes.

Sometimes the whole world seems to be against me, he thought as he strolled along in the hilly neighborhood past other two-story homes with manicured lawns. *I do the best I can. Things seem to turn out wrong. I try hard. What else can I do?*

He took some deep breaths and pulled his jacket tighter around his increasingly large body. He looked at his belly. *Moreover, mom and Peggy stay on me about gaining weight and my clothes fitting tight and magnifying the problem.* He moved his head from side to side, shaking as he thought.

Food always seemed to comfort him in times of stress. Lately, there was plenty of it. When he returned home from the walk, his wife's car was gone. It was not a big surprise, nor was the letter he found on the kitchen counter when he went inside.

"I'm going to my mother's for a few weeks," the letter read. "Don't call me; I'll come back if and when I feel I can tolerate it."

It was not signed, but no need, of course. Robbie was sitting on the sofa, thinking, when his phone rang. He wondered who it was knowing it was not Peggy. Looking at the screen, he saw it was his mother. "Hi, Mom. What's up?"

"It's your grandmother, her cancer is not responding to treatment, and the doctors said she might not ever come home again," and Robby heard soft weeping on the other end.

"I'm terribly sorry to hear that, Mom, Me-Ma has always been special to me ever since I was a little kid."

"I know, ever since you couldn't say Mamie, so Me-Ma was all you could get out. She loves you. Will you go visit her in the hospital?"

"Uh, I'm really pressed at work, and other things are not going to good with me right now. That's over a two-hour drive from here to Memorial Hospital."

"She'd love a visit from you. We don't know how much time she has left."

Robbie heard the pleading in her voice and considered it had been way too long since he had visited. However, he hated sickness and visiting hospitals. It did not suit him at all. However, considering her grave condition, and he did love his grandmother, he agreed.

"I'll call in for some sick leave time in the morning and drive down to visit with her."

“On, that’s wonderful, sweetie, I know how happy mother will be to see you,” Irene said.
“I love you, son. Call me from the hospital and let me know how she is doing when you get there.”

Robbie assured her he would and went to start packing. He planned to stay for at least overnight to avoid a four-hour round trip and one long visit might be the last one he would get a chance to make. He planned to be back the next day.

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Robbie arrived at his grandmother’s room and quietly entered with a faint knock. He saw his ‘Me-Ma’ there with eyes closed, looking gaunt and pale and for a moment he thought she might have died.

Then she opened her eyes. “Oh, grandson, I didn’t hear you come in, all these machines and stuff,” as she leaned her head off the pillow.

Good to see you, Me-Ma, how are you feeling?”

“Oh, I have good days and bad days. This one is in-between, I suppose,” as she held out one arm not attached to IVs and other sensors.

He leaned over and hugged her. She put her hand on his shoulder and patted it. They chatted a while about how his life was going, but he didn’t bring up recent events and his wife leaving the day before. As often, their chat drifted to the old days when he was a little boy playing at Me-Ma’s house.

“I remember the photos I have at home showing me celebrating my third birthday in my playroom, which was also grandfather’s shop, but his shelves had more of my toys on them than his tools.”

She smiled and said, “Hand me that photo album over there. Irene brought it from my home, and I enjoy browsing it for the comfort and memories.”

He handed it to her, and she started at the front with photos of his mother, Irene, when she was a girl and teenager, marriage to his father, and later some of the photos he remember of him as a child growing up at her house during summers and special occasions like Thanksgiving and Christmas.

“Those Thanksgivings I remember the most. I so look forward to them every year, Even now that your family all lives several hours away, when you join me at Thanksgiving for our traditional family lunch, it---it means everything.” She had a constrained sound to her voice, and she winced trying to finish her sentence.

Me-Ma,” Robbie said with alarm, “are you in pain?”

“Just like hitting a nerve every now and then. It’ll pass. She pressed her palms against the bed as if stretching, and said, “now its better. Where was I?”

“Thanksgiving.”

“Oh yes, you, your wife and Irene and Lewis’s visits and help with our traditional gathering keeps me looking forward to each year. They come faster and faster. I may not make it for this coming Thanksgiving.”

“Please don’t say that, Me-Ma, sure you will. It’s only a month and a half away. And we’ll have a grand gathering again just like we always do.”

“We’ll see. I want to hear more about you, your wife Peggy, your job and things in your life. Reading between the lines when I talk to your mother, things aren’t so good in recent times.”

Robby paused, thinking if he wanted to bring it up at all, or tell a little white lie, but decided he’d tell her the truth. He covered all the bases of work, marriage, and his life in general, which was pretty sour. Everything had turned against him, he said to her. He even talked about his father being too busy with the business to pay him much attention for years.

“Now grandson, let me give you some advice from an old lady who’s learned a thing or two since I’ve been around.”

Robby scooted up closer in the chair next to her bed, smiled and nodded, “I’d love to hear it.”

“First off, I want you to stop meeting people halfway on decisions and opinions.”

That got his attention. “But I always thought that was good advice.”

“See, that’s what I mean. Forget *halfway*. There is no halfway. Don’t draw any lines in your mind or otherwise, understand?”

He nodded, and she continued, “And don’t expect things of other people, or you’ll be disappointed sooner or later. Just let them run their lives, and you run yours. Give way more than you *expect* to get. Give more love, more kindness, and more of yourself to others. The giving is what makes a person happy, not expecting or getting things or feelings in return.”

Robbie continued to listen and sometimes question his grandmother's comments. She explained herself and went on. The afternoon was dwindling, and he could see his grandmother hurting and tiring.

“Grandmother, I need to leave you. I have a motel room for tonight, but I'll come back in the morning, and we can continue our conversation until I leave to go home later in the day,” as he leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. She patted him on the cheek as he did.

The next day, he felt good about what he learned about himself. It had been a very long time since Robby sat down with anyone to have a heart-to-heart talk. After lunch the next day, the time came for him to leave, and he excused himself to go to the hall and make a call to his motel. He told them rather than check-out, he wanted his room for at least five more days that would take him through the weekend before he returned to an empty house and work the next day.

Me-Ma was so happy he was staying longer for his visit. That afternoon, turned out to be one of her worst afternoons from the pain of cancer that riddled her fragile frame. The morphine pump had to be set higher, and it barely eased her pain.

The next morning he came in and again she had her eyes closed, and he paused wondering just how long she might have to live. He moved the chair closer to the bed, and the slight noise awoke her.

“Glad to see you again,” she said with a smile that said she was feeling better.

Robbie smiled in return and said, “I have enjoyed our time together so much that I have decided to stay a few days more.”

“Wonderful,” Me-Ma said, “let me talk about wise advice starting with the Ten Commandments.” She made him recite them from a rusty memory that he only got the first five right. When he had them all fresh in mind, she covered a few other key passages about not holding grudges and hate discussed in the bible.

Lunchtime came and went. Their conversation drifted from Bible wisdom to the accumulated good advice from good people through the ages.

Early afternoon came and Me-Ma said, “Now let’s talk about what Dale Carnegie teaches in his books.”

“Where do you get all this sage advice from, Me-Ma?”

“From a lifetime of learning not only from my mistakes early on but from people a whole lot smarter about a successful and happy life that I needed to learn,” she replied, in a tired labored voice.

“You seem very tired. We’ve been going at this quite a while today,” Robbie replied.

“I guess I am, this cancer thing takes it out of me, but it’s better than all the chemo would have been, and all it would do is maybe delay the inevitable. I know my own health better than the doctors will tell me.”

He didn’t nod this time, but silently thought she was absolutely right. She was right about everything she had said since he had arrived. Now he regretted not getting to know his grandmother as an older adult, better than he had.

That night he called his mother from the motel room to talk to her again as he had been giving her daily updates on Me-Ma. “And we have talked about so many things that have helped me understand not only other people but mostly myself,” he concluded.

“Sweetie, I am so glad for you to spend this precious time with my mother. I continue to learn tolerance from her all the time when I call frustrated about something going on in my life too.”

“I’ll be coming home soon. I sure am glad you talked me into coming here,” Robbie said, more enthusiastically than he’d been in a long time. He felt invigorated.

The next morning, similar to previous ones, he slowly walked into the room, but immediately noticed that his grandmother’s sleep was more solemn than he had seen it, her face was white and there was no other sound in the room. The machines were silent.

A nurse hurriedly came into the room. “Oh, Mr. Forrester. I was just now trying to call you or your mother. I’m terribly sorry to inform you that your grandmother passed away just a short while ago and we stilled the machines that were beeping alerts. Is there anything I can do?”

Visibly shaken, Robbie said, “No, I knew her situation was very serious, but it’s still a shock. None of us thought it’d be this soon. She seemed so alert and clear-headed these past few days.”

“Our patients are often that way in the final days. After they make peace with the world, they let go and drift off.”

“I’ll call my mother back home and let her know to spread the word. Thank you, nurse.”

“Oh, right there on the eating table is a folded note and it appears to be addressed to you. I guess she wrote it last night,” the nurse said.

Robbie took the note, gently shoved it in his back pants pocket as he lovingly looked at his grandmother, who appeared to be sleeping peacefully with a slight smile on her face.

Robbie called his mother next, and gradually, the word went to family members and friends. When Robbie called his wife, Peggy, she already knew about his grandmother and was most sympathetic and kind. The funeral took place a few days later, and Me-Ma would sleep eternally next to her husband who died ten years earlier. Then the family returned home.

Robbie did learn many life lessons during the days he spent with his grandmother in the hospital room. Things improved with his wife Peggy, his job, his friends, and everyone in his life. He lost weight with healthy eating. His wife would find him reading into the night with some new books he'd acquired as well as keeping the family Bible closer at hand for occasional reference. Life was good. Better than ever.

What about Me-Ma's letter? It read: “Dear Grandson: I have loved these past days you have spent with me. They are more precious than anything you could have given to me. I think you have learned many things about yourself during our chats. I want you to promise me you will read the books we talked about and practice what values you find to be true for you. That will make you happy and me eternally happy. I love you very much. Me-Ma.”