

Together After We're Dead
-William Napier

Remember When?

It had been over a week. It seemed like a month, but the calendar said otherwise. The final treatment failed. Everyone knew it would. Irma most likely knew it before anyone else. She lay there with Stanley watching over her. She seemed happy and pain free. But he knew better. The morphine drip was merely allowing her to get some rest. It stopped working as effectively as it did in the past few days. He wrestled with many thoughts. Most seemed to conflict each other. This was her time. He should do everything to make her comfortable and happy. Yet he was selfish. He kept thinking 'what if' thoughts. What if I forget to tell her something important before she passes? What if she doesn't know how much I love her? I'll have to tell her again to be sure; when she wakes. How will I live? Is there an anecdote or tidbit I failed to tell her. Oh I couldn't let her die without something missing. Yet, as old as he was, he realized he had finally grown up. It was selfish in a way. But there is a maturity to discovering that fact. Even further, to know that they both shared common goals. Yes. She'd love to hear how she is loved at least one more time. It would benefit both of them.

He remembered how they'd watched each other grow old. They weren't the horny teenagers in love anymore. No. What they had was something much better than that. But now it was dissolving in front

of his eyes. He looked over her face. It was as beautiful as it had been as a teenager; different but the same. He loved all of her wrinkles as 'cute'. Her curly wisp-white hair reminded him of either cotton candy or the first snow. He realized he was feeling over-poetic but he didn't care. Anything he can do for his own mood will help him help his wife.

Her hand squeezed his and he flashed out of his reverie.

"Why are you looking so glum you old sour puss?" She laughed as she teased him. It was a light raspy laugh but it was the best she could manage.

"Good morning baby." Stanley said. "Well, to be honest it's really late afternoon, but I like telling you 'good morning'." She just kept looking at him. It was a stare she'd perfected. It wasn't harsh. It merely said she was a bit more serious than she let on and he'd better answer. "Ok, ok" He looked away. "I'm just missing you already and you haven't" He looked back at her. "you know... yet."

"Died sweetie. Passed on." She said as she squeezed his hand again. "It's ok. I'm hurting so bad. I'm ok with this."

Now she was comforting him. Was he being selfish? It was sweet of her to do this but he felt her time was short she should have or do whatever she needed. He felt she needn't waste her time comforting him.

"It IS ok. It's natural. And I have no problems comforting you my love." It was as if she could read his mind. It didn't surprise him. They had been like this from the start. They knew each other so well that it was nearly a form of ESP between them.

"Though I'll... well I don't know about me. I suppose I'll cease to exist. But you'll remember me. Our children and grandchildren will remember me. My published books will live on. I'm very happy with that. But honey, it's you that will feel things like 'suffering', 'longing', 'misery'. Not I." She waited. Baiting him. They loved to lightly argue and she was playing the game at this late hour. It was an unspoken pastime of theirs.

He started to respond but she interrupted him. Her desire to bait left her. "But it doesn't have to be that way. You can honor and remember me. You can start by not looking so sad. That would make me happy."

He smiled at her. They just looked into the other's eyes. Sometimes they could have entire conversations with their eyes and body language.

"Remember the moment I lost my religion?" he asked.

"Well, no. I remember around the time it happened but I didn't know there was a specific moment." She had never been really religious. Of course her parents used to make her go as his parents did the same to him. Only he fell for the whole dogma hook line and sinker. Well maybe not the sinker. He was too logical and asked too many questions. That was bad for religion. He grew up on it so it felt normal and as if it were 'the undisputable rule'. Only his logical side kept raising questions that question the very foundations of the religion. It was so interesting the way his upbringing overcame logic. He went to church for a little bit off-and-on while they dated. His interest in church dwindled. Logic was winning. And just before they married, he quit going.

"Yes, I've defined it to one moment." Stanley said. "Do you remember when we were planning our wedding? I approached my pastor as I was concerned about something I read in the Bible. It was Luke 20:34-36. Pretty much, it instructs that we can get married 'in this world' but when we are brought to the angels that we are no longer married. We are of the angels. It was confirmed by my pastor. And that broke my heart. It was that moment I was won over to the world of logic."

"I was always glad you did too." She smiled at him. "That would've broken my heart too. I left for different reasons but I like yours just as well."

"Irma, I don't want to ever be away from you. It isn't fair. If there is anything after this, I swear to try to find you." It sounded silly but that was all he knew how to express himself on the possibility of an afterlife.

"Oh honey, you were always the raving romantic." Another squeeze of his hand. "And I love you for it."

They talked into the evening and fell asleep together. She in the hospital bed and him hunched over head into her side. It was their last night together.

Irma Passes / Stanley Struggles

His face was a mess. It was streaming with tears and gooey snot. He didn't care who saw him. There was only one person whose thoughts mattered. And she was being slowly lowered into the earth. He watched her go. His heart burst with emotions of all kinds. Most of them of a self-destructive nature; sorrow and fear to name some. She wouldn't have approved of it. She asked him to be happy, but

they both knew that wasn't going to happen. His 'kids' hugged him. They were all adults with kids of their own. But they were still his kids. They spent the day together ending with dinner out on the town. They loved their mom and felt similarly crushed. Their visit seemed much too short. The day was over and his children traveled back to their homes. He watched the last of the cars leave the restaurant parking lot. He wished sorely that it would rain hard so he could wallow in the misery, but it was nauseatingly sunny.

He returned to those thoughts of his from yesterday; 'what will happen to me?'. It was time for selfish. It was now survival. He felt as if he was in a survival movie. Everything in his life had to be rethought. Day by day is the way. That just came to him and made him smile a bit. Another piece of comfort was his basset hound Cletus. He'd be waiting for him. He'd need Stanley to come home. All dogs needed their people to come home to them. That made him smile. His house wasn't entirely empty.

Cletus welcomed him in his usual way: by bouncing around his master's legs. He did act as if he knew something was wrong with his human family. But this was Cletus' happy moment. Anytime Stanley entered the house, he was greeted by his hound.

He sat on the couch and riffled through the bills on the stand. He should've been meditating in quiet reflection about his wife, but he couldn't help himself. He worried about her, but was also worried about the money situation. He'd thought the life insurance would help with the burial, pay off the rest of the mortgage, and leave him with a supplement to help pay monthly bills. He was wrong. The hospital bills were astronomical. He was sure if this were a township

expense like new street construction, even his town couldn't afford it.

He laid the bills back down then laid back in the chair. He missed her. He missed her even when she was in her last days. There isn't anything in this world that would make him whole again. They grew together. They were one and the same. He knew she felt likewise. Like now. He could feel it. It was probably his longing or wishful thinking. He heard that when a loved one dies, you truly feel the absence. Somehow he felt her presence. No not like a haunting. She was simply a part of him. So what if it were make-believe? So what if it was real? It felt wonderful.

Many weeks passed as Stanley struggled to cope with his loss. Cletus was a sweet pet, and Stanley treated him like his own son. But it wasn't enough. The pain of losing his Irma was too unbearable. They say Stanley died of 'old age'. Maybe that's true. It was possibly too early for him as his health was decent. He simply died of a broken heart.

Love You Always

At Stanley's funeral, his children brought Cletus. "He would've enjoyed that" His eldest said.

"Nobody minded. Stranger things have happened at funerals before." His youngest replied. They watched the casket lower into the ground. Stanley's name was carved next to their mother's. Stanley and Irma 'Forever Lovers in the Hereafter' it read. It was a little odd to the children. It was odd because neither of their parents believed in the hereafter. They supposed it was simply a matter of hope.

Hope that they would find each other no matter what lay on the other side.

The trees moved with the breeze. The flowers thrown. The children hugged each other. Grandchildren where held. As they walked away, the youngest seemed lost in thought. Then he wondered aloud "I have heard that couples who have been together so long and loved so much die within months of each other."

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes Stanley."

"I love you Irma."

"I love you too."