

One Joy at a Time

by Eleanor Dart

The letters keep coming. In 1976 I receive a letter in fine shaky handwriting with sentences that straggle across the page and fade out into faint ghosts of words. "I am sitting by the fire listening to the Beatles' song 'Once there was a way to get back homeward,'" he writes. "I used to think there was a way. But no more..." I know something is terribly wrong.

There is a tumor the size of a robin's egg growing behind my father's right ear, sending out thin tendrils into his brain. The cancer is inoperable. Within three months he is dead.

I do not cry when my father dies. I go to the funeral dry-eyed. It is as if a gauze curtain separates me from my life. I reach out to touch across a great distance, and can feel nothing.

One Joy at a Time

It is July in Tucson. The year is 1987. A monsoon wind is blowing the curtains back from the eastern window of my bedroom, carrying the scent of rain.

Tears blind me, tears held back. I am exhausted from shoring up the dam. Finally I howl, pacing the floor, sobbing uncontrollably. This has been going on for weeks. I don't know why I am crying.

Some internal reservoir of heartbreak has cracked open and I am helpless in the flood. Tears well up in me without warning. From the library, the market, the bookstore I run for my car and drive around for hours, shaken with sobbing, pounding on the wheel. I don't understand it. I feel I cannot stand it. My arms and breast ache with emptiness, with the loss—of what? I do not know.

I call friends and they offer what comfort they can. A glass of wine. The touch of hands. They tell me about simple things—taking the kids to the park, rebuilding a jeep—and their voices are like soothing music. For a time I am calmed.

Then it hits me again. Grief grabs me with blunt teeth and shakes me head to toe. I begin to feel like a boxer in the tenth round of a losing fight. I keep getting knocked down, I struggle to my feet, and WHAM, I'm down again.

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Now it is an August afternoon and despair has driven me from the house. The sky over the Santa Ritas south of Tucson is black as night. I turn the wheel and head into the storm.

Out Houghton Road the first drops hit the truck and then a torrent of rain engulfs me. I pull over and sit with windows open as rain crashes on the roof and blows in sheets into the cab. Fingers of lightning touch down all around me; thunder rips the sky over my head. Rain bounces off the pavement, and swift streams of water cut small gullies in the red-brown sand beside the road.

The wind is cool. I open the door and step out into the storm. Water pours over my skin. Lightening strikes again, and I jump for the car.

I drive for hours, chasing the rain. Out to the Santa Ritas, east toward Dragoon and El Paso. Gray clouds move across the sky, releasing long traveling sheets of coolness.

Toward evening I find myself driving slowly home over the small hills of Old Spanish Trail. The sunset light is golden on the palo verdes. The desert smells of rain.

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One morning high in the pines of the Catalinas a companion picks up a piece of granite studded with flakes of sparkling mica. "What kind of rock is this?" I answer and hear my father's voice patiently explaining how crystals grow.

Daddy seems to live within me in the days that follow—I feel his free-swinging stride as I walk; I sense his thoughts inside my mind. I begin re-reading the letters he wrote me, long buried in dusty boxes. The love in them is so intense that I can hardly bear it.

"I like the song" 'My father always promised me,'" writes Daddy. "It invites one to weep for lost faith or lost dreams. I've had my share of them too. But there is an answer contained in the song itself, 'My father always promised me that we would live in France,' and the singer herself now lives in France! The father didn't make it, I guess, but his daughter did, and now in her song she turns her nostalgia back toward the Ohio mining town.

"I think her father made it too. I think his promise and his aspirations were for her more than for himself. No doubt the mines held him and disappointed him too—but she made it. She lives in France. Joy for him.

"Speaking as a real father, what did *I* think I was promising you? That everything would be all right? In the end, yes. That dreams would be fulfilled? Yes, sometimes, if not always, but not without effort. One thing I did used to say—so much that Mama used to tease me about it: 'It's hard, but you can do it.' Dreams are not made real easily. A faith or a life dies and is reborn with real pain. It *is* hard. But you can do it, and in the doing you can find both joy and excitement.

"I would love to climb a real mountain with you. I'm willing to try any pitch with you for which you are ready to say to *me* 'It's hard, but you can make it.' Provided you are giving me the upper belay."

We never climbed that mountain. I turned away and then he was gone. And I could not forgive myself for abandoning him. I never mourned my father. His loss was too painful, my guilt too great. I drew a veil over the past; I went numb. For years I have been blindly seeking absolution. Until now.

Now I am seeking with eyes open. I read Daddy's letters and the love there keeps breaking my heart. I walk into the pain, remembering.

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Early on an October morning I am driving to Pontatoc Canyon in the Santa Catalina Mountains. Last night the first autumn storms swept into the valley and I fell asleep listening to wind and rain shuddering through the eucalyptus trees outside my window. This morning the skies are clear as spring water. Every leaf and stone is etched in brilliant light.

I leave the truck and hike up the canyon. Red and gray banded cliffs tower above me. Sand grits beneath the soles of my shoes.

The trail is alive with tiny brown ants. Birds flash by and land, lizards dart up the rocks. A few prickly pears still carry fat red fruits, weighting down the ends of their pads. In the creek bottom the cottonwoods have turned gold.

I push myself up the steep hillside enjoying the good feel of muscles working deep in my legs. Halfway to the ridge I stop, breathing hard, and turn to look out over the valley. The mountain is silent in the morning air.

I can see every rooftop of the city below, and beyond to Baboquivari Peak, as clear and close as my hand. I can see a hundred miles, a thousand miles, all the way to Mexico, to the ocean, to Oregon, all the way into every corner of my past. Everything is washed clean and clear.

I came to Tucson like a blind dog on a scent, drawn by remembered terrain—the sandy arroyos and granite cliffs of El Diablo.

I came with nothing but a pregnant dog, a few pots and pans, and the determination to stop, just to stop. I had been trying hard for years in all the proper ways, but something was missing and I was bone-tired from the search. As I did in Diablo Canyon, I simply called off the fight. I found free housing. I took just enough work to get by. And I waited.

Years of hiking in the wilderness have taught me to follow the faintest of trails. Tracking over desert ground this trail has led me back into myself.

When I lose faith I go out to these desert canyons. I hold rocks in my hands and feel their strength. Now on the ridge, I think of my father's words, which it has taken my half my life to understand:

EASTER MORNING

APRIL 12, 1971

LETTER TO ELEANOR FROM BOROKO, NEW GUINEA

When the sun is out our yard dances with butterflies; in the evening a solemn tree frog, bright green with red feet, stares in at my study window; at night I hear the flup flup of a big fruit bat who comes to check on our papayas. It is strange and exotic and gives one a rather detached feeling.

Easter in its larger sense has hardly affected me this year. Rather I find myself thinking in small terms. Individually. We each die continually, almost randomly, one hope at a time. One defeat after another is death enough. But we learn too that no hurt is forever. One recovery at a time, one joy at a time, is resurrection enough.

Excerpts from the book Coming Home from Devil Mountain

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