Don’t Be Sad

The old man took a sip of bourbon without taking his eyes off the lake. This was his favorite way to end the day. He couldn’t do it in the winter, of course. He had to drain the water system, close the cabin, and move back into town long before the first snowflakes fell. But in the summer, he could sit in a rocking chair on the porch, stare at the lake, and watch the day slowly fade from the sky.

Tonight there was a fisherman slowly drifting between the two massive oak trees that framed his view. The cabin was perched on top of a hill overlooking the lake, giving him the feeling that he was master of all he surveyed. It had rained earlier and clouds still obscured the moon, but the clouds were thinning. Occasionally he could see a faint glow where the moon lit up the clouds. It was early enough in the summer that fireflies blinked randomly above his lawn. How many years had he been enjoying this view? It looked the same as it had when he was a kid, sitting on the porch with his parents. He didn’t sit and enjoy the view for long back then, of course. Kids have to be doing things. He couldn’t understand how his parents could just sit and do nothing for what seemed like hours. He would go back into the cabin and read a comic book, or work on a model airplane, or pester his sister. His parents wouldn’t get a TV for the cabin because they said it was too “intrusive.” Now he had a TV, but he almost never watched it. It was too intrusive.

He remembered the mixed feelings he had when his parents announced they were going to sell the cabin. It was getting to be too much work to keep it up, they said. Now that their kids were grown, they hardly ever used it. “We had it when we needed it,” his mom said wistfully. The day they announced they were going to sell it was the first day he realized how much the cabin meant to him. He had spent every summer there when he was growing up. But now he was grown up, married, and expecting his first child. He lived several hours away, and his company was about to send him to open a new office even farther away. There was no way he could keep it up. “It’s time to let it go,” his brain told him, but his heart wasn’t happy with that answer.

Fortunately, Elsie told him it would be crazy to let it go out of the family. “We’d never get it back,” she said. “Someone will bulldoze it, cut down all the trees, and put up a mega-mansion.” He knew she was right. He’d watched that happen to other cabins around the lake. She convinced him that they could buy it and spend their vacations enjoying it and doing whatever critical repairs were needed. She also pointed out that their kids would enjoy swimming, fishing, and water skiing as much as he had. If he let it go, he would be denying them the chance to have wonderful cabin memories. It caught him by surprise because normally she was the practical one and he was the dreamer. He was an engineer and she was a liberal arts major,

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but their personalities did not match the stereotypes of their degrees. Her argument carried the day on this decision, and he never regretted it.

That wasn't the only time his brain and his heart had been at odds. Long before he met Elsie, he thought he was in love with a girl who decided to move closer to the coast because she liked the beach. His heart pleaded with him to quit his job and follow her, but his brain correctly surmised that if she liked living near the beach more than she liked living near him, she wasn't the one for him. Good thing, too, because otherwise he would never have met Elsie. They had enjoyed a wonderful life together. One day, after they had been married for more than thirty years, he was suddenly overwhelmed with the absolute certainty that their love would go on forever. He knew that was his heart speaking, as his brain had never been able to fully accept the idea of eternal life. It wanted to, but the physics of how that would be possible never made sense to his brain.

One thing his heart and his brain had agreed upon was that Elsie would outlive him. His brain looked at the actuarial probabilities and knew he'd die first. His heart looked at the prospect of living without her and knew that could never work. Both were wrong. It took a long time to get over the shock and horror of discovering that someone you loved, someone you thought had just overslept, was stone cold. It seemed to take an eternity for the paramedics to arrive. During that time, when he was alone with her in the bedroom they had shared in life, he was struck by how peaceful she looked. Much later, long after the tears, the condolences, the legal and financial details, and the numbness of the funeral had faded into obscurity, his brain accepted the fact that love, and therefore life, could last for eternity. The details of how that worked no longer mattered.

"Don't be sad because it's over. Be glad that it happened." What brought that memory to mind? That was written on the blackboard in the band room the day his daughter graduated from high school. They had gone into that room so she could turn in the music they had played during the ceremony, and so she could bid one last farewell to her band friends. The idea of being glad because it happened seemed appropriate at the time because the school band had been a close "family" for four years, and she was leaving that forever and facing the uncertainty of college. As it turned out, it was great advice. She loved college, and although she had fond memories of high school, she never regretted moving on. What came afterward was even better.

He suspected his brain had retrieved this memory to remind him he was getting old. His brain had a long-standing dispute with his heart. His heart still felt that he was twenty years old. Mid-thirties at the most. His doctor had told him he was in great shape for a man his age. He was scheduled to do a book signing next month. He was making great progress researching

his next book. He couldn't die. He still had too much to do. He knew that eventually his brain would win this argument, but not for a while. Not for a long while. He was siding with his heart.

It was getting late. There was a definite chill in the air. He had finished his bourbon a long time ago, and the fisherman had long since given up and gone home. The fireflies had bedded down for the night. The lake was as smooth as glass. Most of the houses around the lake were dark, with only scattered security lights still shining. The thinning clouds finally parted, and the moon shone through brightly. The yard was bathed in a silvery light.

He was suddenly aware that there was a woman standing beside him. A beautiful woman dressed in white robes. Her beauty wasn't romantic, it was the beauty of peace and serenity. He no longer felt the chill of the night. He knew she was the angel of death, but for some reason he was not afraid. As she bent over to kiss him he heard her whisper, "Don't be sad because it's over. . ."

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