

## Mittens

The indignities of old age. “Whoever thought up that phrase must have been old,” George thought as he sat propped up in his nursing home bed, an oxygen concentrator hissing on the floor beside him.

It was hard for him to accept the fact that he was old, with nothing to look forward to but his own death. He had been young and strong for so long. Four years in the Marine Corps. Fifty-seven years with his wife Emily. Backpacking and bicycling. Wilderness canoe trips with his buddies. Running in the 5K races his brother organized for charity. They were all gone now. His wife, his buddies, his brother and both his sisters, his friends from the Marine Corps – all of them. And he sat in this bed. Eating bland food from a tray at specific meal times. Trying to ignore the noise of the TV the man in the bed next to him watched constantly. He couldn’t bathe himself. He had to be helped to the bathroom. And every few days a volunteer would come by and wheel him out on the veranda, for a few minutes of sunshine.

Why did he still cling to life? He often pondered that question. He had no false hopes of getting better, but something inside him stubbornly wanted to live. He had a good appetite. He took his medications willingly. He was concerned any time the nurse who took his vital signs didn’t smile at him. He thought of the Woody Allen line “I don’t fear death, I just don’t want to be there when it happens,” but that really didn’t describe his feelings. He didn’t fear death. He just didn’t want life to end.

All his life he had hated endings. As a little kid he cried one Christmas night because it had been such a wonderful day but now it was over. Now he didn’t want his life to end because it had been such a wonderful life. Looking back, his childhood seemed idyllic. There had been the usual hiccups – last one picked for team sports, the school bully, breaking his arm when he fell out of a tree, high school romances that ended in tears – but he’d gladly do it all over again. His tour in the Marines had built character and taught him many things, but one of the things he learned was that it wasn’t the life for him. After he left the Marines he met and married the love of his life. Ellen had been his soul mate, someone with whom he could share all of life’s triumphs, tragedies, and beauty. Their greatest disappointment had been their inability to have children, but that gave them more time to devote to each other. They had both enjoyed their careers, and when he reached his company’s mandatory retirement age she retired too, so they could travel and have adventures together.

Ellen had died five years ago. Mercifully, she had gone out relatively quickly and peacefully. They had been doing less traveling as the years advanced, focusing more on local events like art fairs and lecture series. One morning she felt a tightness in her chest when she woke up, and her shoulder was numb. She said it didn’t really hurt, but it concerned her enough that they went to the local clinic. They immediately sent her to the emergency room, where George and Ellen learned she had suffered a heart attack. They had a few days to discuss her possible death while the hospital ran tests and scheduled her for surgery, but she had a second heart attack and died as they were wheeling her into the operating room.

George felt as though the world had come crashing in on him when Ellen died. For months he was overcome with grief. He couldn’t bear to move any of her things, and he burst into tears when

unexpected events triggered memories of her. Time has a way of healing wounds, however. The periods of tears gradually became flashes of bittersweet memories, which eventually yielded to periods of fond memories. His mental health improved, but his physical health deteriorated. It was probably the years catching up to him as much as it was the stress of losing Ellen, but despite the best efforts of George and his doctors he passed from living in his own home to an assisted living community to this nursing home.

One of the reasons George was afraid to let go of life was that he had never been able to believe in an afterlife. Ellen had never doubted it. She had family stories about relatives on their deathbeds, who had joyously greeted departed loved ones who appeared to them. She herself had heard comforting words from her parents when they died, despite the fact that she was hundreds of miles away and would not “officially” learn they had died for several hours. She had been a pillar of their church. George had attended church with her and had tried to open his heart to believe in heaven, but his heart never felt it and his brain dismissed the idea. No dead relatives had ever reached out to him. He dreamt about Ellen almost every night, just as he occasionally dreamt about his parents and his brother and sisters, but they were all dreams about the past. Dreams about when those people were still alive, not messages sent from an afterlife.

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Night came. The man in the bed next to him fell asleep, and the nurse’s aide mercifully turned off his TV. The bright daytime lights were extinguished and the nighttime lighting gave a soft glow to the room. The aide had adjusted George’s bed to a semi-reclining position, as he had trouble breathing when lying flat, and she propped pillows under his forearms so they would not hang so heavily on his shoulders. George was alone with his thoughts. He dozed on and off, which for a couple of years now seemed to be what passed for sleep. His dreams were a jumble of past and present, of people he knew and strangers, of familiar situations and unexpected problems, the way dreams always are.

He and Ellen were backpacking. His brother was with them, but his brother was about six years old. They played with him and took care of him the way George had when he babysat his little brother. George was in the Marines, but the project he was working on was the kind of thing he’d done years later in his civilian career. He couldn’t find the information he needed so his Sergeant Major came over to show him how to do it. The Sergeant Major turned into his father, showing him how to hold a baseball bat. Then his father told him to go play with the neighborhood kids, whom he knew would pick him last.

He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. It was no surprise to find he was in the nursing home. As with many of his dreams lately, he seemed to have been only half asleep. The other half was aware that he was dreaming, so he was not surprised to wake up. He often woke himself up if a dream became confusing or unpleasant.

He was lying in a hotel bed next to Ellen. Through the window he could see the Alpenglow on the mountains where they were going to hike. She looked at him with such love in her eyes that he ached to embrace her. He reached out to her and they hugged, pressing their bodies tightly together. She was

warm, and soft, and full of life. He felt himself waking up so he clung to tighter, not wanting this wonderful moment to end. Then he found himself staring at the ceiling again. Fully awake. He was sad that this beautiful dream was over.

He was in his bed at the nursing home, but he was a little kid. His mother was sitting next to his bed, telling him he could have all the ice cream he wanted. He felt a plop on his bed, and soft footsteps across his chest. Mittens! The cat a neighbor had given to him as a kid. He hadn't thought of her in years. She rubbed her face against his cheek and licked his ear as he petted her. Just the way she did every night when he was growing up. He didn't want this dream to end either, but something forced him to open his eyes.

She was still there! It wasn't a dream! Somehow, Mittens hadn't passed out of existence when she died. After all these years she had come back to him. She wasn't just a voice or a vision. He could touch her, feel her fur, and hear her purr. Did this mean Ellen still existed somewhere?

Mittens curled up on his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her chin with his finger. She purred, and he fell asleep listening to her purr, just as he had done when he was a kid.

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In the morning the aide who brought George's breakfast called the nurse to say he she couldn't wake him up. The nurse hurried in, felt for a pulse, and called the doctor. They straightened things up a bit, reclining his bed and closing his mouth.

"He looks as peaceful as I've ever seen him," the aide said. "It almost looks like he's smiling."

"Poor dear," the nurse replied. "He hasn't had much to smile about lately."

"Look at the way he's clutching that pillow to his chest," the aide said. "I wonder what he was dreaming about."