

When Darkness Fell

Dusk was settling on our street as I pulled into the driveway. The air was cool and held the hint of wood smoke as someone in the neighborhood, getting a jump on the cold weather, was already enjoying a cozy fire. I love Friday nights. At week's end, there's always a sense of luxury and freedom to know two full days stretch out ahead with no jarring alarms or trips to the office.

I'd had another enjoyable week on the new job, and was more grateful than ever that I'd transferred into the conventional homes division. Bo was a wonderful boss: a great sense of humor and, though I'd been there barely a month, he'd already made me feel like an integral part of the team. True, our IT Department seemed a bit nervous about Y2K and whether or not all of the company systems would fail, but they gave everyone continual updates, assuring us they had matters well in hand. I wasn't worried: most everyone presumed the worst-case scenarios wouldn't play out and everything would be fine. For now, the weekend was before me and better yet, the holiday season had begun. Thanks to my new job and my improved outlook, this was going to be a very happy Christmas. It was December 3, 1999.

As I stepped out of the car, I glanced across the street at Mom's house and was somewhat disturbed to see her blinds were open and the windows dark. She had been living directly across from us since May of 1998, and in that time we had grown accustomed to her daily routine. With darkness gathering, it was unusual for her to be gone, because she didn't like to drive at night.

I went inside, found Mike and immediately asked him if he knew where Mom might be. He said he hadn't heard from her yet today, but was sure she'd be coming home soon. Understanding my concern regarding her empty house, he said not to worry. Besides, it wasn't completely dark yet.

After we had each recounted highlights of our day to the other, our conversation turned to the subject of dinner. As I was not especially keen to go out and even less inclined to make dinner after a long week, we decided on take-out from a good Thai restaurant just a couple of blocks away.

Mike called our order in and went to his office to collect his keys and wallet, and I settled down to watch the local news. The 5 o'clock broadcast had just begun, and my attention was immediately drawn to the "Breaking News" banner across the screen.

The anchor reported an accident on 15th Avenue which had, unfortunately, resulted in a fatality. That street being just west of us, I immediately made the connection to the traffic accident and the helicopter overhead, which I'd seen

silhouetted against the setting sun on my drive home and could still hear overhead. The in-studio anchor handed the report to the copter pilot, and the screen showed an aerial shot of a sedan wrecked against a tree, its hood crumpled. The accident didn't appear very serious, so I was surprised to hear someone had died. As Mike headed out the door to retrieve our dinner order, I cautioned him to be careful. "The accident's right in the neighborhood," I told him, "so they may have diverted traffic."

Setting out plates, flatware and napkins, I continued to watch for Mom's return. She was probably just at the grocery store, I reasoned, as she tended to make a jaunt there every day. I'd talked with her last night and she hadn't mentioned having any special plans this evening.

The phone rang, and I thought it might be Mom. But Caller ID read Catholic Health Care West. Annoyed, I didn't pick up, presuming it was a charity fundraising call. Didn't solicitors all have a knack for calling at dinnertime? The phone rang again a few minutes later, and again it showed the same ID. I was convinced now it was a fundraiser, as no message was left either time.

Mike returned with our Thai and as we ate, we discussed possible scenarios for Mom's whereabouts. He pointed out that just recently she'd attended her 60th high school reunion in Chandler. That event (which she thoroughly enjoyed) had lasted all day, and she had returned after dark then with no problem. Maybe, Mike suggested, she was off doing something else like that tonight.



The dinner dishes washed, I was sitting in our unlit bedroom looking at the house across the street. Her blinds remained open; it was now past 6 o'clock and fully dark. Softly I said aloud, "Mom, where *are* you?"

A white sedan pulled up and stopped in front of our house, but the driver remained inside. Curious, I watched him for some time, but he didn't do anything. After ten minutes or so, he stepped out of the car and moved to open the trunk. I could see he had a holstered gun in his hand, which he placed in the trunk. After closing the trunk lid, he sat again in the driver's seat.

Mystified and intrigued about something so odd, I went into the living room to tell Mike. Calling me Gladys Kravitz, as he always does when I behave like a nosy neighbor, he told me in so many words that I was crazy. I knew I'd seen a gun in his hand, however, and we speculated about what this man's presence on our street meant. Making a logical deduction, I speculated he might have business with our neighbor. Jonathan was a strapping fire fighter, and my thought was some case or other had brought an undercover cop to our street. Maybe the stranger was meeting Jonathan, who wasn't home yet.

I didn't like that Mom's blinds were still gaping open in the darkness, advertising no one was home. I told Mike I was going across the street to close her windows, and I retrieved her house key and stepped out the front door. Maybe while I was there I could find a clue, like a note on her fridge or calendar, indicating what her plans were this evening.

I was almost to the sidewalk when I realized the man from the white sedan had stepped out and was speaking.

"Are you Nan van der Steur?" I was shocked.

"Yes."

"Daughter of Mary Lou van der Steur?"

I knew.

My lips felt stiff. "Yes," I said again.

"I'm Detective Hyde from the Phoenix Police. Can we step inside, please?"

Struggling to make sense of what was happening, I said, "What's this about?" He had joined me by now and held his arm out to indicate he wanted me to turn around.

"Can we please step inside?" he repeated. I was on autopilot and did as I was told.

In the glow of our porch light, I could see that Mike, hearing our voices, had come to the door. As I led the detective in, I introduced the men to each other. I added unnecessarily, "He needs to speak with us."

Mike repeated my question, and the detective asked us both to sit down. Then, looking at me, he gently said something he'd no doubt memorized from a script, and had possibly spoken many times.

"I deeply regret to inform you that your mother was involved in an accident this afternoon. And I'm very sorry to tell you she didn't survive her injuries."

Physical pain can take a moment to reach the brain and as it travels, you anticipate its pinnacle with dread. As soon as he'd said my mother's name to me, I'd known what he'd come to tell me, though I didn't know the details. As soon as he'd said her name, my emotional pain began its journey.

I asked if the "accident" had been a car accident, which he confirmed. The preliminary investigation indicated she'd suffered an attack of some sort behind

the wheel, then she had hit another car. She'd been taken to St. Joseph's hospital, he said, but they'd been unable to revive her.

I asked if anyone else had been hurt, and he said the driver she'd hit had suffered a broken arm. But it didn't seem serious, he said, and otherwise the driver appeared to be fine.

Now I began to understand. Recalling the helicopter, I asked if the accident had happened on 15th Avenue, which the detective confirmed. With a lurch of my gut, I realized the car I'd seen on the news earlier was Mom's car. As I'd watched the Breaking News and wondered how someone had died in so minor-looking an accident, I'd been looking at the scene of my own mother's death.

The detective spoke to us very kindly, answering all of our questions, most of which I can no longer remember. We learned the phone calls I'd dismissed as solicitors had come from the hospital. When next of kin couldn't be reached by phone, the detective was sent to personally deliver the news. Detective Hyde had been waiting out front for a uniformed officer to join him, as is protocol, but he'd gone ahead and intercepted me when I had stepped outside. He explained where the body was now and what would happen next. He provided literature on accident investigations, and local resources for grief counseling. He gave me his card.

As Mike and I walked him outside, I thanked the officer for his kindness and told him I was sure this type of call was difficult for him. He agreed and added, "It's especially hard this time of year."

For a moment, I didn't comprehend what he meant. Then I remembered: the Christmas season had begun.

The detective got in his white sedan and drove away.



Holding hands, Mike and I walked across the street, unlocked Mom's door and stepped inside.

Usually warm if only with her sheer presence, the atmosphere of my mother's home that night was cold and eerie. The inky blackness pressing against the open blinds made me feel exposed, and the air was chilly. The news we'd just been given was all the harder to absorb because as empty as it was, the house held no real feeling of abandonment. There was an air about the home of complete normalcy; of an occupant out for just a brief errand, due to return within minutes. Mom was on such an errand, we'd later find out: she had gone to pick up Christmas decorations.

On a living room table was a dirty plate and a fork, likely from lunch earlier that day. The mundane sight, at once both pedestrian and poignant, moved Mike so much that his composure fell away. “She expected to come back,” he said miserably. “She should have come back.” We hugged and cried.

Eventually I went around the house closing the blinds she had opened for the last time that morning, and making sure the back and garage doors were locked. I carried the plate and fork into the kitchen but couldn’t bring myself to wash them. That seemed too intrusive, somehow. Satisfied the house was secure, I turned on the porch light and Mike locked the front door. Now, ironically, the residence looked warm and welcoming and occupied – though the mistress of the house would never come home again.



In this life, Mom’s journey ended in a way she likely would have considered sloppy. She didn’t want to die behind the wheel, and she certainly wouldn’t have wanted to hurt another person in doing so. And what was perhaps saddest of all, she just missed enjoying one last Christmas. *She expected to come back.*

I recall Mom once saying a person can’t routinely say goodbye to loved ones like it’s the last time they’ll see one another. She was a pragmatic, “tough old nut” who considered such sentiment unrealistic. I’m not so sure I agree.

Life can, as the expression goes, turn on a dime. Bad luck can reverse in a moment of good fortune just as happiness can, in an instant, turn to inconsolable sadness. A day that began like any other ended in a way I could never have imagined. When the sun set that Friday night in 1999, nothing would be the same.

And the darkness, in many ways, remains to this day.