

The Phone Call

by Jean Travis

I answered the ringing phone and a strained voice asked, “Mom, can I move home?” My heart sunk and my mind began to whir.

“John, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“I can’t live this way anymore,” he said. “Kate and I are getting a divorce.”

“Oh, John, you know you’re always welcome here.” My mind was going numb. “We have to think this through.” I said. “I just don’t think it would be wise to vacate your house. You sound like you need someone to hug you. Can I meet you somewhere? Do you want me to come to your house?” The questions tumbled out as my brain raced.

“Ya, I do. Could you come down?” he asked in a very small voice.

“Give me 30 minutes and I’ll be there.” I said. I had gone directly to my computer that morning without the usual shower and shampoo and I was a mess, but this was no time to dawdle. I quickly ran a brush through my hair, grabbed my keys and left for John’s house.

My mind flashed back to a scene years earlier when his dad and I had experienced an ugly confrontation with Ron slamming the door as he left the house. John had been four at the time. He and Jacque, age six, and David, age two, had all clung to me, crying. Jacque had said, “Will we have Christmas?” And John had said, “I feel like my heart’s been pierced by an arrow.” David had just cried because everyone else was crying. Later I had thought, “How did John even know those words?” Pierced by an arrow. This blond, curly-headed little cherub had summed up the situation succinctly.

Now he was experiencing his own painful divorce saga, and I knew he, as well as my other children, had vowed to avoid it if at all possible. I thought of the house he and Katy had been so excited about buying right next to the University of Minnesota where he could go to class and she could go to rehearsals at the theaters in the area.

In that call he had been ecstatic. “Mom, you’re not going to believe the house we found. It’s perfect for us. It’s in a historic, restored area on Longfellow Avenue and all the houses are either brick or wood siding turn-of-the-century with front porches and gingerbread trim. They face a boulevard planted in flowers and trees. You’ll think it is so cute.”

And it was true. It was cute. The exterior remained true to the turn-of-the-century, but the interior had been remodeled into two contemporary apartments, one on the first floor and one on the second and third floors. The third floor had been fashioned into a balcony area that featured a bedroom with skylights and a Jacuzzi bath.



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Immediately after moving in, John hung their large autographed wedding picture high up on the dining room wall that spanned the two stories. The photo was a poster-sized replica of the cover of their wedding invitation that had been designed cleverly as a romance novel. There high up on the wall the cowboy held the opera star in a dramatic pose under the title Sweet Betrothed. It was the perfect place for the picture of a perfect couple.

I checked my speed going down 35W and thought, “Pay attention. Traffic gets crazy by the University downtown.” At last I parked in front of his house and ran up to the door. John, tall and handsome at six foot one, met me in the entry, and I noted his red-rimmed eyes and the quiver in his voice when he said, “Thanks for coming, Ma.”

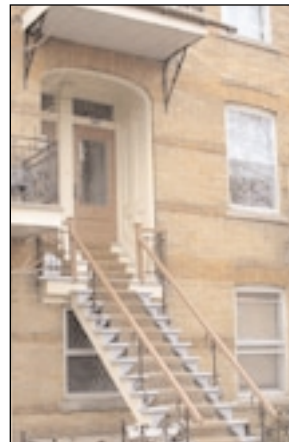
We went up the stairs to his apartment, and I was met by the dogs who jumped up on me greeting me with canine exuberance. “So much for David’s Christmas present, Dog Training for Dummies,” I thought. I calmed the dogs and then began to calm John, a task I willed my numb mind to do. “John,” I said, “I knew you were unhappy this summer, but I had no idea things were this bad. Let’s go sit on the couch. You talk and I’ll listen.”

We sat down and the dogs, Dabay and Oogie, joined us. “In the spring,” John began, “Katy told me she didn’t think she wanted children — ever, and you know how I love children. Then she told me she didn’t think she felt the same about me. You remember when you came with Uncle Ralph to the Swingin’ Sisters production?”

“Yes,” I said. “That was in May.”

“Well, after the show when we were all talking in the lobby, I noticed a guy hanging around eyeing Katy. That night, she came home three hours later. I remember, Mom, how you tried for eight years to make your marriage work with Dad and I just can’t do that.” This piece of news struck a painful cord. Katy had seemed tired and aloof during the summer and John was depressed at times. I had thought it was her awful schedule that was getting to them both.

But no, the very thing I had prayed would not happen to any of my children was happening to John, my middle sensitive son who bought roses for Katy’s opening nights and supported her in her career. He had been in love with her from college days riding to Madison, Wisconsin, and back. He went on, “I told her I would never ask her to, but I’d like to know if she had to, would she give up her career for me? I just need to know I matter. I’m not a bad person.”



“Oh, John. You are a beautiful person,” I said. “And not just because you’re my son.” My heart was breaking and my head racing as I thought about the years I had lived with a wounded heart and a permanent lump in my throat. How could I help him remove the ache in his heart, the lump in his throat? “I know it’s hard for you to hear me talk about your dad and me, but I have to tell you that I finally realized in the middle of the agony back then that I could have been Gina Lollobrigida, Marilyn Monroe and Bo Derek all wrapped into one and Ron would still have left to find someone else. His issues were far greater than “our” issues. It’s not entirely you, John. I know we all have faults, but I know, too, that you have done your best.”

We continued to talk and John began to gain some control over his emotions. “I feel so much better just talking about it,” he said. “I’ve been miserable and I just didn’t want to tell you.” I could identify only too well with him as I thought about those years long ago when I had pretended everything was just fine and my family had known something was very wrong.

It was nearing five. I didn’t want to be there if Katy came home from her rehearsal at the Fitzgerald where she was in a Shakespeare play. We had all been so excited with her when she landed the role.

I gave John another hug and told him I loved him – and that a whole lot of other people did too. We would all be there for him. Driving home I thought about my beautiful daughter-in-law with the tremendous voice and how I had grown to love her. I had gone to the Swingin’ Sisters four times and told her my attendance was right up there with her mother and dad’s. I was doing pretty well for a ma-in-law. I had tickets to the Fitzgerald for the next night.



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