

## TAKING TIME TO SAY GOODBYE

by

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I opened my eyes and had no idea where I was.

The last thing I remember was hearing the weather alert on the radio. I was halfway between the farmhouse and the entry to our storm shelter when it got dark. The wind came up behind me causing me to sprint faster. It knocked a shoe off. I bounced off a building. I was no longer in control of my movements. That's all I remembered.

Now, it was dark and silent, and I didn't know where I was.

How long had the silence hung over me? I had a strange feeling about time. I may have been unconscious until now. How long had I been asleep? Where were the rescuers? Where was I? What should I do?

Call for help.

“Help. HELP . . . HELP.”

More silence. I waited. It will take a long time for rescuers to get this far.

“Jan? Is that you?”

I didn't respond. It was too scary. It sounded like Howard.

“Ronnie, thank God. How did you get here so fast?” Ronnie and his family lived more than two-hundred miles away. Of course he would have heard about the storm, and he was here to check on me.

“What do you mean? It's Howard, not Ronnie. Are you okay? Talk to me so I can tell where you are.”

Howard?

The kids had insisted on getting the shelter. If you're going to live where tornadoes are, you need a shelter. So, we got one. We haven't used it yet.

Howard? I didn't know what was going on, but I talked so he could find me. "Okay. Can you hear me?" I said it with a little more force.

"Yes. Hold on a minute and I'll be there."

"Okay." I could hear noises nearby. First, the sound of wood against wood, then the sound of someone groaning and straining.

"Jan?" he said.

"Yes?"

"I can hear you, but I seem to be stuck. Something is holding me down."

"Oh, dear," I said.

"Maybe you can help me," he said. "Are you able to come here?"

"Okay," I said. "Hold on."

I moved my right arm an inch one way and then another, but that was all. Each time I was blocked by what felt like a thick piece of lumber. I then tried my left hand, my arm, my feet, my whole body. I was stuck.

"Howard, I can't move."

"It's okay, Jan."

I'm frightened. What should I do?"

"Don't worry, sweetheart. The rescuers will be here soon."

“You don’t know that. It’s forty miles to the nearest neighbor. Nobody is getting here soon. Why do you exaggerate so?”

I don’t know why I had to say that. He means well. I’ve heard “don’t worry” a million times. It’s so easy to say, but . . .

He’d done all the fretting for me over the years. Everyone knew it. He said he’d do the worrying for us, for me, and the kids. And he did.

“I’m sorry, Howard. I’m stuck inside something, feeling claustrophobic.”

“I know,” he said. “Trust me. The rescuers will be here soon.”

Our farm is out away from civilization. The kids told us to sell it and move to town when we got old.

“Howard, do you remember what the kids said?”

“Which time?”

“When the last tornado came near us. They said to sell the farm and move into town. And Ronnie said we were too old to live out here away from everyone.”

“You’re not old.” he said. “You’re only seventy-four.”

There was no sense in responding. Howard had always been the positive one in the family. He took charge of any trouble that came up. Problems like the leaking hot water heater, the time the toilet tank cracked while we were on vacation, and much more. He was always calm and in control. And he could fix most anything around the house.

“Howard?” I asked.

“Yes?”

“I want you to know how much I love you. You know, in case . . . in case we don’t see each other again.”

“Don’t say that.” he said. “I’m right here. The rescuers should be getting close.”

“Still, I want you to know how much I love you. You did so much for me and the children over the years. We never thanked you.”

“Sure you did, Jan. You thanked me in your own way. A smile here, a touch there, and your eyes spoke volumes.”

I felt so loved. Calmer now. That was the effect he had on me.

“Howard, you make me . . . less scared. You always did. We’re lucky in a way. Not everyone has time to talk to a loved one this way. I love you and I wish I had told you more often.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it. I’ve felt that love from the day we met.”

I was silent, taking it all in. Knowing what might happen and getting more relaxed about it. If only I could hold him in my arms one last time.

I felt perspiration on my head and face. I tried to call out to Howard and found no voice.

“How . . . ,” was all I could manage.

Prayer. A word I hadn’t used lately.

“Howard, I’m surprised you haven’t reminded me to pray.”

He didn’t respond.

“You always knew when it was time to pray. That kind of scared me when you told me because that meant what I was fretting about was bad.”

Nothing.

“Howard, are you there?” I said it a little louder.

“Yes, prayer,” he said, “That’s right. This is the perfect time for prayer. Dear, God . . .”

His voice faded away.

I had the same feeling I have when I wake up from a long nap. Relaxed, calm, unafraid. I moved my right hand and knew I was still stuck.

“Howard, are you okay? I must have fallen asleep.”

No response.

I must have fallen asleep when Howard had started to pray. Maybe he fell asleep, too.

“Howard?”

Still no response. I should let him rest. But I couldn't. I had to know he was okay.

“Say something, Howard.”

I waited. Listened and waited and called his name over and over. He didn't respond.

I heard a vehicle getting closer. Could it be the rescuers?

“ANYONE HERE?”

It wasn't Howard, but it meant someone was looking for us. That's what Howard had said would happen. “Howard, did you hear that? The rescuers are here. You were right. We'll be okay. Oh, how I love you.”

“We're here.” I said loudly.

I could hear a dog whining.

“Howard, can you hear the dog? We're found. We'll be free soon. I can't wait to hold you in my arms, Howard. Oh, how I love you. I'm going to keep telling you that until you get sick of it.”

“Ma'am, are you with someone? We were told there was one woman living here alone.”

“Me and my husband, Howard. We're the only ones here. But he is in another part of the farm. We're close enough to talk, but I don't know where he is. He is stuck like me. He tried to break lose to free me, but it was too difficult.”

“Howard,” I called out.

A board broke loose above my head. Debris covered me from the neck down. A young man handed me a bottle of water.

“I can’t move my hands,” I said, looking into the man’s eyes.

“You seem to be covered by boards from whatever building this was.”

I looked around and nodded toward a stack of planks. “I think the barn was there.”

“Do you want me to pour water in your mouth or wait until we get your hands free?”

“I’ll wait.” I searched his face, wanting to remember who came for me. “What’s your name, young man?”

“Jim Taylor, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Jim Taylor.”

I could hear activity nearby.

“Did you find my husband? Is he okay?”

“No. We haven’t found anyone else yet, but we’ll let you know as soon as we do.”

Jim continued to pull boards from around me, being as careful and gentle as possible.

A dog licked my face.

“Good boy,” I said. “I wish I could pat your head.”

Jim freed my hands. “I bet you can manage that water bottle, now,” Jim said.

I patted the dog then took the water and drank half the bottle before I handed it back to Jim. “Did you find Howard?”

“Howard? Is that your husband?”

“Yes. Is he okay?”

Jim looked at me for a second or two before he responded. “Do you know someone named Ronnie?”

“Ronnie is my son. Is he here?”

“Yes. He’s talking to the sheriff. He will be here in a few minutes.”

“Okay. But what about my husband?”

“I was told Ronnie knows all about that.” Jim turned away and, with two helpers, continued to remove the boards from around me.

Well, of course Ronnie knows about all that. What does that mean.

When I was free and out of my wooden nest, Jim helped me stand and then walk.

“Be careful,” Jim said. “No telling what you might step on here. I notice you only have one shoe on.”

I looked at my feet. “The other shoe blew away.”

He pointed toward a pickup truck nearby. “There are some shoes in the truck bed, and some sandwiches if you’re hungry.”

“Thank you, Jim. I may take you up on that after I talk to Ronnie.”

I started to ask Jim about Howard again, but he’d been so reluctant to answer my questions I thought it would be best to find out from Ronnie. It scared me to know Jim wasn’t looking for Howard. It had to be that Howard hadn’t survived. Yes, that’s what must have happened. It was prayer time again. I don’t remember thinking about food but found myself at the pickup unwrapping a sandwich. I took a huge bite as I wondered how long it had been since I had anything to eat.

“Mom?” Ronnie walked toward me.

We're not a hugging family, but we fell together as if we were seeing each other for the first time in years. My sandwich hit the ground.

I think the last time we hugged was when Ronnie came home from Afghanistan. Then, I was thankful he was alive and now, I suspect he felt the same about me. Now he had to tell me about his father dying and I knew that would be hard for him.

I backed away from the hug and looked into his eyes. I wanted to make it easier for him, so I let him know that I knew what had happened. Not the details, but it was easy to conclude that Howard had died. No one would talk to me about it. Jim left it to Ronnie to tell me.

But Ronnie was silent.

"Look, dear," I said. "I know what you're trying to tell me. I had a long talk with your father while we waited for the rescuers. As usual, he helped me through the crisis. We are luckier than those who lose their spouses suddenly without having time to say goodbye. We had a good talk today."

"Mom, I know you must still be in shock, but I need to remind you Dad died three years ago from a heart attack. He was in the barn where they found you." He pointed at the place where I had talked to Howard. Where Howard had helped me.

I knew Ronnie was right. Memories poured in repairing the ones I had imagined. But I held on to the part where Howard and I had had time to say goodbye.

I hugged Ronnie. "Yes, dear. I know."