

TIME
and
REGRET

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LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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Published by Lake Union Publishing, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781503938403
ISBN-10: 1503938409

Cover design by Laura Klynstra

Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER 1

March 1991

Divorce is a process, not an event. It takes months to unfold, a barrage of emotional ups and downs as denial is replaced by grief, grief by anger, and anger gradually eases into acceptance. To complete the process, Jim's possessions had to go, so every Sunday since early February, I had tackled a different room in the house.

At first, removing his things made me cry—the rainbow trout he caught at Medstone Lake, a baseball autographed by Mickey Mantle, a tennis racket from when he captained our college team, his collection of antique maps. But now the process felt more like scraping off successive layers of skin, raw and painful, a necessary prelude to life beyond marriage.

Jim had requested the divorce—*demanding* would be a better word—saying our marriage no longer worked. According to him, we had lost the magic—whatever that phrase meant—along with a host of other well-worn platitudes, like I would thank him for it in the future and he would always cherish what we once had. To say I had been shocked is a massive understatement.

Weeks of tears and pleading had achieved nothing, and finally, in an exhausted, robotic state, I had acquiesced. Lawyers and paperwork followed, and I'd turned my attention to reassuring our sons, Paul and Michael, that Jim and I loved them very much and would continue to be friends. Friends? Even being civil was a challenge, but I had become an expert pretender.

That morning I was in the attic surrounded by boxes, dressed in my comfort clothes—faded jeans, sneakers, and a baggy sweatshirt that said “GO THE DISTANCE.” Jammed with discarded toys and furniture and objects that might someday prove useful, my attic is like many others, a space rarely visited, with dim lighting and cobwebs screaming “dust me” from the corners. I had been sifting through boxes since seven a.m., and now five garbage bags stood by the stairwell, making me think of doomed prisoners awaiting a last-minute reprieve.

The attic was the last room to clear. Once it was done, I could begin to look forward, but at that moment, sitting amid so much shared history, my feelings flip-flopped between numbness and nostalgia.

Get a grip, Grace. Finish these boxes. Then you're done, done, done.

The box in front of me contained a jumble of mementos, and I picked up a college yearbook dated 1970, idly turning the pages full of smiling faces. Beneath the yearbooks, two shoe boxes contained photos and I looked through a few, pausing first at one with Jim and me in a field of sunflowers and another on a beach at Mykonos. In both scenes, he stood behind me, arms wrapped around my waist. I put these two photos in a pile designated for further consideration.

In an accordion-style folder, I found cards congratulating us on Paul's and Michael's births, my graduation program, school reports, ticket stubs, a slim book of poems, and two bunches of letters held together by rubber bands. Frowning, I pulled out a twenty-year-old letter and began to read. *He did love me*, I thought, tears slipping down my cheeks. Releasing both rubber bands, I read them one by one, sighing

over remembered incidents and pausing to wipe my eyes before gently placing each letter into a garbage bag as though laying a corpse to rest.

I got up and looked out a tiny window at the street below, where my neighbor was walking her dog in the rain, the dachshund waddling along, chest barely clearing the puddles gathered on the sidewalk. I wasn't the first person to experience divorce, and I wouldn't be the last, but I had never imagined *being* divorced, the pain of starting over, the feeling of rejection, the twist of shame when I glanced at my ringless finger, and a still-bruised soul. Thunder rumbled in the distance, followed by lightning that flickered across the sky. A god-awful day for a god-awful task.

Cross-legged on the floor once again, I lifted a metal tackle box onto my lap. A rusty clasp held it closed, the kind that required a strong thumb to release the catch. I pressed hard to no effect, then pressed again with both thumbs. "Stupid thing," I muttered. I shook the box. *Doesn't sound like tackle gear.*

Grumbling, I traipsed down two flights of stairs to the kitchen, where I kept a few tools in what was referred to as the junk drawer. No sign of my boys, which wasn't surprising for a Sunday. Back in the attic, with a hammer in one hand and a screwdriver held against the clasp with the other, I banged hard. The lid popped open.

"What on earth . . . ?" I said.

The smell made me wrinkle my nose, reminding me of the time our basement flooded while we were on vacation and the weeks required for the odor to disappear. On top was a gray belt with a silver buckle. The items beneath were equally strange: two brass buttons adhering to bits of gray cloth; a picture of four soldiers; a tattered envelope marked *JANE*; a hand-drawn map; a letter with a return address in London; a magazine dated 1980; and four small notebooks tied together with a ribbon. At the very bottom were three bullets. Astonishing.

A memory surfaced: a summer day when my grandparents had come for dinner and my grandfather had brought along a battered

tackle box. Must have been eight or nine years ago. I remember wondering why he wanted to store something like that at our house, but Grandpa had not explained and the boys had been running around causing havoc, so the moment to ask had passed. Jim must have put it in the attic, but why had Grandpa left these particular items at our house? How very strange.

The envelope marked *JANE* contained a series of letters written from a place called Longuenesse, the first dated January 12, 1918. Given some of the details described, Jane must have been a nurse, but was she a friend of my grandfather's or someone more significant? The other envelope contained a letter from a man named Alan Butler, and referred to healing wounds and dreadful English weather. It closed with the words "get as many of those bastards as you can."

On the back of the photograph were the names Pete, Martin, Bill, Michel, and the date, May 1915. Four young soldiers looking keen and energetic, arms around one another's shoulders as if huddling to hear the quarterback call the next play. Martin was my grandfather. There was no mistaking his angular face and the shape of his eyebrows, asking a question even in repose.

The map, full of squiggles, arrows, and strange notations like *FB4* and *3.C.I.*, revealed nothing, and the magazine was in French, an art magazine of some sort. After removing the ribbon from the notebooks, I opened the one on top, and a piece of paper slipped out.

I rocked back on my heels. A box full of curious mementos and a strange note from my grandfather—the man who raised me and who died almost ten years ago.

4/3/72

To my dearest Grace, read carefully. I never should have taken them.

Love always, Grandpa

CHAPTER 2

May 1991

My grandfather's baffling note and the contents of the tackle box pursued me everywhere: to the grocery store and the dentist; to meetings at work and rush-hour trips home; while standing in the shower and washing dishes after dinner. Everywhere.

Grandpa's war diaries—the notebooks he left behind—were both fascinating and disturbing. At the outset, he was keen and ready to serve, but soon the details became gruesome as men under his command died or suffered wounds so terrible he thought they should have died. As the months and years unfolded, he wrote about the senselessness of it all, furious that military leaders treated soldiers as little more than ammunition. He wrote about meeting my grandmother and the deaths of everyone he cared for. In the end, he was crushed by despair.

I went to the library and researched World War I. To understand the experience of those on the front lines, I read accounts of that war's appalling reality and the physical and mental trauma soldiers suffered. I found military maps and looked in vain for markings such as those my grandfather left on his map. I studied uniforms of German, English, and Canadian soldiers, peering at belts and buttons. Yet nothing

brought me any closer to answering the question that plagued me: What had Grandpa taken that was so important he left a secret box of clues behind?

Read carefully. I never should have taken them. As Grandpa directed, I had read them carefully, not once or twice, but three times. The diaries revealed no overt clues to suggest a secret message. And what might he have taken? Surely not the belt and buttons or the bullets. I couldn't see how such items would have prompted deep regret. Could Grandpa have been referring to taking the lives of German soldiers? In over three years he must have killed many Germans, but that was in the line of duty. Regret? Yes. But not the kind of regret his note implied.

One evening, Paul found me poring over a map of France, marking locations mentioned in the diaries.

"You're obsessed, Mom. Why don't you just go to France and visit those places?"

I would have hugged him right there and then, but he was fifteen and at that stage where his mother's affection was decidedly uncool, so I simply smiled. "You're absolutely right, sweetheart. That's exactly what I should do."

The next day, I called a travel agent, and the following Saturday, I went to see my grandmother.



After my father died and my mother fell apart, I lived with Grandmama and Grandpa from the age of five to twenty-three. Perhaps I was a contrary child, or perhaps looking after a child in your fifties and sixties was too taxing; either way, Grandmama and I were often at odds, and now that she was ninety-two, grumpiness was her daily companion. I tried not to take it personally.

"I cannot comprehend why you're going, Grace," she said now. "What on earth do you expect to find over there?" Grandmama waved

one hand as though banishing a servant, a gesture that had become increasingly imperious as she aged. Despite the promises of expensive cosmetics, age spots dotted her hands and face.

We were sipping tea in the living room of her Upper East Side apartment, a room filled with traditional furniture and a collection of art featured on more than one occasion in *ARTnews*. Although New York had been her home for seventy years, my grandmother retained a distinct English accent. I kept my voice calm.

“I just told you, Grandmama. I obtained a copy of Grandpa’s war record, and I want to visit the places where he served. And besides, I need a break.”

“Why do *you* need a break?” She tapped her cane on the Persian rug for emphasis.

I took a slow breath and lifted the Wedgwood teapot, which always reminded me of the year my grandmother insisted on new chinaware. Nothing but Wedgwood would do, and Grandpa had complained about the cost for months. “More tea?” Grandmama shook her head. “Divorcing Jim has been hard on me. With the boys and my job and everything else, I’m worn out. I need a break. Simple as that.”

“And at the drop of a hat, you’re going off. Who will look after the boys? You cannot possibly leave them for four or five weeks.”

When I first hatched this plan, the boys had been my primary concern. However, their reactions were enthusiastic, Paul’s in particular; my sensitive child seemed to know the trip would be good for me. Michael had called it awesome, his favorite word for anything significant.

“The boys are fine with the idea, and I’ve spoken to Jim. He’s pleased to have them until school ends, and then they’ll be at camp for two weeks. Afterward, they’ll stay with him another week or so until I return.”

“Well, your mother and I need you.”

Was that her usual grouching or was something else implied? I decided to ignore the edge in her voice. Grandmama often brought

up my mother, who had lived in an institution since the year after my father died in a plane crash.

“Mother hardly knows me anymore.”

“But I need you. You’re being selfish. It’s not becoming.”

My uncle had died when he was two years old, and Grandmama had had no other children. I was an only child. In the past, such an accusation might have caused me to waver, but I held firm. Grandpa’s puzzle was an unexpected gift, one that deserved close attention. I chose not to mention the contents of the tackle box, particularly the diaries, or ask if she knew what my grandfather had taken. If Grandpa had wanted her to know, he wouldn’t have left the box at my house.

France shone like a distant beacon. Following Grandpa’s path would lead me in the right direction.

Emotional health was the other reason for an extended vacation. Beyond the grief of losing my marriage, I felt burdened by people and chores: my mother and grandmother, Paul and Michael, work responsibilities, financial matters, and the myriad details of running a household. I was tired of putting the needs of others ahead of mine. If that was selfish, so be it.

My best friend, Joan Patterson, called the trip a divorce honeymoon. My boss at Colonial Insurance had been apoplectic.

“You can’t possibly leave now,” he’d said when I’d asked for time off. “You’re in charge of marketing. The merger is almost finalized, and your role is critical. If we don’t get enough synergies in marketing and sales, the board will be down my throat.”

“But you know nothing much will happen in July, Rick. Too many people on vacation. Charlotte and Larry have everything under control and I’ll return well before August. You know I’ve never taken more than a week at a time in all the years I’ve been here.” I’d handed him a copy of my itinerary. “If you really need me, you can leave a message at one of these hotels.”

And now I gave a similar response to my grandmother. “You’ll be fine for a few weeks. Philomena comes every day, and she’ll do your errands if you need help. You have my itinerary, and I’ve written out the exact numbers you need to dial plus the time difference. You can call me whenever you want, and I’ll call you once a week.”

My grandmother harrumphed, which I counted as a small win, then cleared her throat in an exaggerated fashion.

“Well, I suppose I’ll just have to manage on my own.”