

# Stories That Bind Us

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To Jocelyn and Sonny.  
Storytellers, both, and very good friends.





Be like the bird that, pausing  
in her flight awhile on boughs too slight,  
feels them give way beneath her,  
and yet sings, knowing that she hath wings.

—VICTOR HUGO



CHAPTER  
*one*

*M*y Norman had never understood why I liked to hang laundry on the line when I had a perfectly good dryer inside. Especially considering my reluctance to create even more work for myself around the house. But on days like that morning, when the sun shone just the way a child might draw it—with beams streaking the sky and clouds full and soft as cotton balls—I simply could not resist.

Days like that made the clothes smell fresh in a way a gas dryer never could.

I pinned half a dozen of Norm's undershirts to the line along with a pair of Wranglers he liked to wear on the weekends, a soft flannel shirt he'd had since the Truman administration, and the dress socks he wore with his church shoes. His briefs I hung on the middle line so the neighbors wouldn't see them.

I certainly didn't want the entire street goggling at my husband's skivvies.

Done with that chore, I stood in the yard, laundry basket resting on my hip, and breathing in the earthy smells of late spring.

Looking around to make sure no one was watching, I put down my basket and kicked off my kitten heels so I could feel the blades of grass through my hose-covered toes. That time of day, the neighborhood was quiet. All the children were in school and the men at work. Housewives were inside mopping the floors or dusting their knickknacks like I should have been.

No one was around to see me plant myself on the soft ground, legs stretched out in front of me, my head tipped backward so the sun could warm my skin, pale from the long Michigan winter.

Shielding my eyes with one hand, I watched a bird soar far up in the sky, its dark wings spread wide at either side. Even though I knew the sun was millions and millions of miles away, from where I sat it looked as though that bird was going to fly right into the center of it.

“Now, what was that story?” I whispered to myself.

A shard of memory pierced its way into my mind. A story my mother had told my sister and me, more than thirty years before. Listing my head to one side, I tried to remember how it went. There’d been a little girl, I knew that much. A little girl who was afraid of the dark.

“She was called Lily.” It was the kind of name that sounded elegant to me. A name that belonged in a story or a song. I tried with all my might to remember how it had sounded when my mother had said it.

For the life of me, I couldn’t manage to bring her voice to mind. It had been so long since I’d last heard it.

What I did recall was that the story had a sad ending. At least I’d thought so when I was younger. It had made my tummy hurt and my heart feel tender for poor Lily.

I shut my eyes, letting the sun glow a pinkish-red through my lids, and tried to imagine a happily-ever-after for her.

The sound of a screen door opening and slapping shut a few houses away made me jump, causing my wandering mind to retreat back where it belonged. Namely, that wandering mind belonged inside where there were floors to be scrubbed and windows to be washed.

Getting myself off the ground, I picked up my basket, smoothing the skirt of my housedress and hoping I hadn't managed to get a grass stain on my behind.

It would have been completely normal for a younger woman to sit in the middle of her backyard, daydreaming the morning away. But a younger woman I was not, so I made my way inside.

It wasn't until I'd put the laundry basket downstairs in the basement that I remembered I'd left my shoes in the grass.



When Norman and I were first married, we had next to nothing. An apartment with very little elbow room, a rusty bicycle Norm used to make deliveries for the family bakery, and a mismatched set of dishes collected from the extras of a few church ladies. That was it. I hardly had a pot to boil water in.

Oh, but we were young and in love. We hardly realized what we lacked.

We lived in that little apartment for five years before we were able to buy a house. Of course, two of those years Norm was gone at war in Japan and I was glad I didn't have to keep up anything with a yard while he was gone.

After he came home, we bought a charming two story on Deerfield Avenue in Norm's hometown of LaFontaine, Michigan. It was a red brick house with white trim and black shutters.

The yard was a nice size with plenty of shade trees and flower beds. Norm apologized for not being able to afford something more palatial. But it was just right for me. It was a home of our own, and that was all I'd ever dared dream.

On the day we moved in, Norm had carried me over the threshold, shutting the door behind us with his foot. He didn't put me down in the living room but just kept on lugging me through to the doorway of our new-to-us bedroom.

"What are you doing?" I'd asked, giggling and blushing in a way that I hoped was becoming of a twenty-two-year-old woman. "Norman!"

"Well, sweetheart," he'd answered, "I thought it was a good time to get started on filling this house with children."

The rest of that memory was best left between my husband and me. I'd always been prone to blushing. Unfortunately, flushed cheeks on a forty-year-old woman wasn't as becoming and a signal of a different kind of change on the horizon.

As sweet as that first day in our home had been and most of the eighteen years after, there were a few bitter times.

From where I stood at my pink porcelain sink, doing up a few dishes, I could see where Norman might have built a playhouse or put up a swing set. I blinked away my imagination and drained the water from the sink before drying my hands. It was a bad habit of mine, pining away after what could never be.

"Now, Betty," I said to myself. "Carry on."

If there was one thing I'd learned, it was that God did give and take away. I didn't have to like it, I only had to accept that he knew what he was doing.

Instead of letting myself think of it too much, I made my grocery list for the week. While some women, it seemed, could work their way through the aisles of the store knowing by in-

stinct what their pantries lacked and only getting what they needed, I tended to wander if I didn't have something to keep me on task.

My list had changed quite a bit in the twenty-three years since we'd gotten married. I no longer had to scrimp and save the way I had at the beginning. I could even splurge a little now and then.

I tried to never take it for granted.

Slipping the list into my purse, I noticed the brown paper bag on the kitchen counter. Norm had forgotten his lunch, the silly man. I grabbed it as I headed out the door.

I never did mind an excuse to stop in at the bakery and see him in the middle of the day.



LaFontaine was a Goldilocks-sized town. Not so big that someone could be completely invisible. Not so small that everyone knew the business of everybody else. It was just right. Our little community was smack-dab between Detroit and Lansing. If ever we wanted something only a bigger city could offer, it was just a forty-five minute drive in one direction or the other.

Usually, though, everything I needed was less than a mile from my front door. I could have walked to get my hair cut or have my teeth cleaned or any other number of things. Of course, I usually drove to save myself a little time.

Besides, I never felt so sophisticated as when I was behind the wheel of my coral and gray Chevy Bel Air. It had been a birthday present from my husband just a few years before. That man of mine certainly knew how to spoil me.

I was glad to find a parking spot on the street, right in front of the bakery. Sweet Family Bakery was as much home to me as the house on Deerfield Avenue.

Before I even reached the propped-open front door, I could smell the warm, inviting scent of bread baking. I tried to ignore how it made my mouth water. Being married to a baker meant that I'd never had to make my own bread or cakes. It had also caused me to be a little thicker around the waist than I needed to be.

Norman said that it was just more to love, which was kind of him, I supposed. Still, I didn't like the way I had to move to the next size up in girdle every few years. As I stepped through the door, I promised myself I wouldn't take a single goodie from the display case, no matter how delicious it smelled.

I knew I wouldn't keep that promise, but at least I made a valiant effort, even if only for a moment.

"Hey there, Betty," Stan said from behind the counter, folding the newspaper he'd been reading and tossing it next to the cash register. "Old Norm didn't say you'd be stopping in today."

I lifted the paper bag. "He forgot his lunch."

"Typical man." He shook his head.

I lowered my eyebrows and smirked at him. That brother-in-law of mine had an interesting sense of humor.

"I was out and about anyway," I said, stepping toward the display case to look at the Danishes, my resolve crumbling. "How are sales today?"

"Pretty good." He nodded at the pastries. "Raspberry. You want to try one?"

I pulled my hands up to my chest, still holding the paper bag. "Oh, I shouldn't."

"Come on. It's got fruit. That makes it healthy, doesn't it?" Stan grabbed a wax paper square and plucked a Danish from the case, passing it over to me. "It's a new recipe. Tell me what you think."

I took the goodie and held it up to my nose. “Oh, it smells wonderful.”

Stan winked at me and turned when he heard Norm step beside him, then went to the back where he, no doubt, had bread dough churning in the mixer.

“Well, I thought I heard your voice,” Norman said. “Hi, sweetheart.”

It was in that very spot that I’d first seen him. Of course, we were both so much younger then. He was every bit as handsome as he’d been that first day. Just a little gray at his temples and some padding on his stomach too. But his smile still made my heart pitter-patter like it had years before. His hazel eyes just as bright. More green than brown.

That day, though, something wasn’t quite right with him. He looked tired, a little pale.

“Are you feeling okay, honey?” I asked.

“Sure thing.” He raised a fist to the middle of his chest, rubbing along his sternum. “Just a case of indigestion.”

“What did you have for breakfast?” I asked.

A good wife would have been up with her husband at four in the morning when his alarm went off. I, however, was of the opinion that if the early bird wanted the worm so badly, he was free to it.

“I had some of that leftover sausage on a bun,” Norm answered. “And a couple cups of coffee.”

“Maybe that sausage was a little spicy.” I cringed.

“Could be.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s nothing to be sorry about.” He came around the counter. “Besides, how can I be upset with a woman who brings me my lunch?”

I handed him the bag and accepted his kiss on my cheek.

“Thank you, sweet Betty Sweet,” he whispered into my ear and put his hands on my hips. “I’m happy to show my appreciation when I get home tonight.”

“Oh, you’ll do up the dishes after dinner? What a treat that would be.” I pulled away from him and gave him what I hoped was a flirty little wink.

“If that’s what you want to call it.” His grin was only half-hearted, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes more defined than usual.

“Do you need me to get you an antacid?” I asked. “Maybe you should just come home and rest for a little bit.”

“Already took one.” He grimaced. “Hasn’t kicked in yet, though. I’m not sick enough to leave work, hon. They need me here. I’ll be all right.”

“Okay. Maybe try a little baking soda in water if that doesn’t work.” Then I raised my voice loud enough to be heard in the back. “Have Stan send you home if you’re still feeling puny.”

Stan peeked around the corner. “You got it, boss.”

“Well, I better get to the grocery store,” I said. “Bring home a few dinner rolls if you think about it, please.”

“All right,” Norm said, this time kissing my lips.

I patted his chest before turning for the door, the Danish still in my hand. As I was going out, my father-in-law was coming in, leaning heavily on his cane and smirking at me in a way that made me think he was planning on a little mischief.

One of the many things I loved about Pop Sweet was that he treated everyone as if they were God’s gift to him. But he reserved his teasing for those of us he called family.

“You pay for that?” he asked, nodding at the Danish.

“I’ve been paying for it ever since I became your daughter-in-

law,” I answered, raising my eyebrows and trying not to giggle at my own response.

“Oh, don’t I know it.” His eyes sparkled. “Best thing that ever happened was you coming along and marrying that boy of mine so he’d finally get out of my house. I could hardly afford the grocery bill while he was at home.”

“Now, Pop,” Norm said from behind me. “I know you cried at the wedding.”

“Tears of joy!” Pop lifted his arms, wobbling just a little when the cane lifted off the ground.

“Baloney,” I said. “Don’t you remember what you said to me right before the wedding?”

“I’m old, Bets. I don’t remember what I ate for breakfast.”

“You said that I should be good to your son because he was one of your three greatest treasures.” I took a good-sized bite out of the Danish. The flaky pastry full of butter and sugar nearly melted in my mouth. “And you should try one of these. They’re scrumptious.”

“I know.” He leaned on his cane. “It’s my recipe.”

He patted me on the shoulder when he walked past me, his hand warm through the fabric of my dress.

I wouldn’t have told him this, but I knew that the reason Norm was such a good man was because Pop had always been such a good man.

John and Lacy Sweet had raised three of the very best people I’d ever met, and I was grateful they were my family. As I walked out of the bakery, I passed a picture on the wall of the Sweets when they first opened the business. Seven-year-old Norman to the left of Pop and five-year-old Albert to his right. Mom Sweet stood beside Norman, hand on the slight bump of her belly that would eventually become round with baby Marvel.

Someone had taken an ink pen to the bottom of their picture and written “Sweet Family Bakery grand opening, February 1928.”

I wondered if they had any idea that the bakery would still be open even thirty-five years later.

Looking into the photographed eyes of Mom Sweet, I saw determination enough to know that she’d entertained no doubts.

“We’ll stay open until God tells us it’s time to quit,” she’d said to me just a few months before she passed away. “Some are meant to preach and some to build houses. We Sweets were made to bake, and that’s what we intend to keep doing.”

I thought that if heaven had a bakery, Mom Sweet would be there keeping the ovens going.

Goodness, I missed her something awful.

Sometimes I tried to figure out how I was so lucky to end up marrying into such an incredible family. Most of the time I realized it hadn’t been luck at all.

It was nothing short of a gift.