

If your away from the person and all you can think about is him/her and when you do think of them you get a good fuzzy feeling in your stomach. Is it love?

In the Fall of Our Lives

We take our usual walk this morning, although when I wake up I don't want to move. The dry desert winds stir up my allergies and I feel listless, out of sorts. Staring at my red-rimmed eyes and dry, grooved face as I brush my teeth doesn't help the mood. My hair, standing on end, refuses to be brushed into obedience.

Worse, my knees hurt. I feel like the Tin Woodman in The Wizard of Oz that needed a shot of lubricating oil to get going. The connection of knees - father in wheelchair flashes unhappily in my mind. This was how he lost his independence. He couldn't rely on his knees to walk or drive safely.

"I'm not my father," I say to myself firmly. And more softly, tears just back of my eyes, "Oh, how I miss you, Dad."

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"Let's go, darling!" my husband's bright, cheery voice booms from the other room. He speaks loudly, to be heard over the morning news program. I want to go back to bed in silence.

David never takes silence for an answer. Knowing me well, he appears in the bedroom doorway to see if I'm dressed and over my rebellion. He resembles an overgrown boy in his turquoise whale sweatshirt (how could I ever have bought it?), bright red pants, mismatched socks, and run-down running shoes. "You'll feel much better once you get going," he says and kisses me.

His kisses always work magic, even when they're illogically timed.



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"Okay," I mumble, giving in quickly, knowing he's right.

At our front door we turn left into the ocean breeze, lured by a view of the sea at the end of the street. We pass some teenagers hurrying to get to school in time for their first classes. Pete stops suddenly, grabs my hands, and kisses me. We both giggle. I imagine that any student who sees us thinks we're absurd-two antique creatures in baggy sweats in an embrace.

I feel lucky and blessed and embarrassed, all at once, ready to walk the earth with this man who rarely fails to delight me. Ready to do anything not to have my body go out on me, like the old woman we saw yesterday, frail and dried as an old leaf, clinging to a building for support, stopping for rest before she went on. He's right. I need the exercise to get my mental and physical kinks out.

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We walk to the park bordering the beach, lost in our own thoughts. "See you at Willow Street," he says and begins to jog slowly, still-muscular legs as sturdy as ever, belly an unwelcome, perhaps permanent, visitor.

All the things I wanted to change in him now seem curiously appealing-his passion for golf, his sloppy habits, and his invariable optimism. Golf gives him exercise, friendship, and fresh air and helps him slug back at business frustration, and I'd rather pick up after him than have him be a nitpicker, railing at me for being sporadically messy. I know he'll never change. I don't want him to anymore. We are what we are, and somehow my occasional pessimism and his optimism are the perfect dancers, bridging the changing rhythms of life. And he's more thoughtful than ever, in all the important ways.

Where did all the-years go? Gone, leaving us photographs on the family wall and a residue of the silver stardust that is love.

We meet again at Willow, our favorite street. "Do you still want a home here?" he asks, as though we aren't backed to the wall financially, as though we aren't in debt, as though the recession never happened.

"No," I answer, as if the choice is real. "I don't want a house anymore. I feel more secure in our condo because I'm not afraid to be alone when you're out of town. It's just right for the two of us."

"We could get a dog again," he smiles. "A big Saint Bernard, just like Reggie." I think of the rainy night in 1979, when I could no longer deny that our marriage was in

deep trouble. We were lying on the den floor in our tract home, Reggie happily curled between us. A soft porn movie came on and he petted the dog languidly, never thinking of reaching out for me. I remember the ache of being unwanted, of getting up silently and going to bed without washing my face, pretending I was asleep when he came in. When I'm upset, I don't pretend anymore. I talk about it. I don't have the patience to wait. I've learned that much. The more honest I am, the less seems to come up.

The street slopes imperceptibly uphill, but my lungs want more air than I can take in and I fall behind his brisk pace. He turns, missing me.

"I'm not too speedy this morning," I pant. "Go ahead. I'll catch up."

"No. I don't ever want to leave you behind," he says and slows to take my hand and kiss me tenderly.

Memory wants to accuse him: "But you did leave me! You did! Don't you remember? Can you block out everything?" Why can't I do this? It would make life so much easier.

I stop the downward spiral of the blame game. That stage is over. I have nothing to worry about now but time. We're here for each other in a way we never were before, when we glossed over our differences to preserve the image of the perfect marriage. Here we are, wrinkles, bellies, and all, laughing more than ever at the foibles we no longer try to change.

I reach up like a young bride to touch his face, the curve of his cheek, and tilt my face to kiss him. I think I'd rather be here, right now, right this moment, feeling this way, than be young again with perfect knees. I laugh at the unspoken joy that bubbles up, and he looks at me and says appreciatively, "Does any couple laugh as much as we do?" He slides his right hand under the band of my sweatpants, grabbing my behind, knowing I never wear underpants on our walks for exactly this moment.

"No couple I know," I respond. "My behind is getting so much smaller" We both laugh again at my forty-year battle with a flabby butt.

"I can hardly find it," he says, so sincere I almost believe him.

We walk on, a little slower now. His thoughts, I can tell, are on business.

Mine linger on children, grandchildren, and marriage. How many marriages are stronger after a separation? Ours is. Eleven years ago we parted, at his request. He had fallen in love with a younger woman, an employee. We were apart for a year and a half, and I thought I'd never recover from the pain and the anger and the loss of him, but I did. I learned to appreciate myself when I didn't have him to please. Best lesson I ever learned.

So it has come to this: Noticing thoughts fly through my mind like a flock of birds. I choose this one and that, not feeling their prisoner-most of the time. Noticing we're in the fall of our lives, amazed that spring and summer have gone... wondering when winter will come.