

Sudden Insight

By Nancy Martz

He should have held more grudges, his wife of forty years believed. She had regularly confided to her closest friend his tolerance for other people's bad behavior, used by neighbors and relatives to his hurt. She regretted that she couldn't stop him from being too unselfish for his own good.

Her pain and bitterness shifted to confusion as she thought of his unflappable contentment, his stubborn high spirits no matter the perfidious advantage even his own kin took of him. How could he be so blasted servile to others and yet retain his good humor, deferring to them when he should have called them out; he should have turned his back, slammed the door. Why was he such an easy mark, such a fool, always jovial, ready to help when anyone had a need?

She had not held her scolding tongue when he loaned money, rarely returned, to somebody in a fix, and when, with his Sunday suit on, he had dug a stranger's car out of the mud during a downpour; she'd seen him change flat tires for healthy kids, loan his best tools out time and again, usually they came back broken if at all. She grimaced, remembering the homeless family he had brought to her table; he had even pre-paid a month's rent for their room at the motel. Her grievances had piled up; the more she had endured, the deeper into resentment and despair she had fallen. Now she was standing here with the whole rotten town and a bunch of degenerate neighbors, relatives, and strangers spreading out across the lawn back to the church as his coffin was lowered.

For months after the funeral, her closest friend was there for her, weeping with her, assuring her of his saintliness. Cards with money and letters about him came daily. She paced the house re-reading the lines of respect, gratitude and affection. They wrote about his sense of humor, recounting his witty stories and how his joy in life inspired them. They remembered his generous heart—his ready helping hand.

For a while, she obsessed about her perceptions of him as a pushover and regretted berating him all their married life. He might have lived longer but for her nagging. She wept thinking of his loyalty and love for her in spite of her constant reproaches.

One day she went into his tool shed, lingering there, seeing his miter saw, his rotary hammer, the wet/dry vac. She opened drawers and ran her fingers over drill bits, clamps, and the stud finder. In one drawer she found a wooden box with a heart carved into the lid. She frowned and opened it. The love letters inside were not from her. She rifled through them, scanning down to the signatures. Then she gazed out the window, her eyes widening, her blood pressure rising, recalling how her closest friend had listened to her years of complaints against him and was this moment standing at her front door.