

## DAFFODIL DAYS

By Claudia J. Taller

I walked miles from Windy Hill to Willow Beach on the day my mother died. I needed to be by the water while I thought about Mom and how she playfully brushed my cheeks with butterfly kisses on the night before she died. That moment floats in and out of dreams and through my daylight hours, the meaning eluding me. Yet it was simply what it was—an intimate moment.

A year later, and yellow and white daffodils again brighten the hillside above Willow Beach. Even before my mother's death, when the daffodils drooped their heads by the back stoop of the house, they were a reminder that even a wilted life would go on, no matter what I decided to do about Windy Hill, the family farm.

Why didn't she tell me more about my father? Why didn't Mom tell me she knew about Jerry? My life had been molded by things left unsaid, and along the way, I'd forgotten much of what I once knew.

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In the months before Mom's cancer diagnosis, far away from the world of Windy Hill, I prepared the December issue of the magazine in hope of winning the International Magazine Association's editorial prize. I hit the intercom on my office telephone and yelled, "Jamie, where's the cover spread? I don't care what your excuse is, get me the mock-up as soon as you can. Like, yesterday."

"But Elizabeth, I'm still waiting for the designer to get it to me."

"I don't care. It needs to be done. And it better be impressive."

She sighed audibly. "I'll see what I can do."

The glass windows, thirty floors above street level, reflected a petite woman with dark shoulder-length hair. Startled by my own eyes staring back to me, I exhaled slowly, trying to gain composure. The more I worked, the stronger the tug of wanting something new pulled on me.

When I turned around, small, olive-skinned Jamie, flustered by the rush, walked through the doorway. "I have what he gave me. I think you can get a feel for it, but it's not done yet."

I took the mock-up from her. The cover showed Jerusalem's Holy

Trinity Cathedral turrets glowing against a star-filled sky. A bevy of parishioners waited to get inside, Christians in the heart of the land of Judaism and Islam. It was a beautiful scene, and everything was going to be okay.

Jamie was smiling. "You like it, don't you?"

My shoulders relaxed. "Tell what's-his-face to complete it. I have no changes."

"Will do." She walked out the door fast, as if she had to leave before I changed my mind.

*They don't get me. They don't know it takes absolute perfection at every step to get it right.*

When the phone rang. I almost let it go into voicemail, but the number looked familiar. "Elizabeth Kramer."

"Betsy?"

I didn't recognize the voice. "Yes?"

"I'm in town. How about meeting me for dinner?"

Robert. I loved his smooth-as-chocolate voice. His brown hair was always a bit ruffled and a little too long, his dark eyes warm under thick lashes, and he carried himself with light confidence. He thought about the problems of war, the state of Catholicism, and the way African women were mutilated. He was a photographer with a heart for the problems of war, the state of Catholicism, and mutilated women in African. He believed in perfection as much as I did. "What are you doing here in Cleveland?"

"Hoping you'll have dinner with me."

My heart sank. "That's not good."

"Why not?"

"I'm not really available."

There it was, his marvelous loose laugh. "Yes, you are. You're very available. You're all grown up and you have no ties and you've been divorced forever."

"I guess you remember me."

There was an uncomfortable silence until he said, "Of course I remember you. We had a fabulous time together last month. Did I misinterpret how it was?"

"No. It's just . . . I don't expect things to go anywhere."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

He took charge, so I had no choice. "I'll pick you up at seven."

Then I felt sorry for myself, working so hard, pushing, always pushing, and all I really wanted was to have dinner with Robert. Why couldn't I just have fun?

I thought I loved my work with all my heart. Right then, I knew I didn't.

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We were sound asleep when the phone rang at 6:30 the next morning. When I picked up, Cassie said, "Hey, Mom . . ."

"Cassie?"

"Grandma's dying." She was choking back tears.

I sat up, not sure I'd heard. "Dying?"

"Yeah, you heard it right." Her voice was tense, terse, clipped.

"Are you sure?" Robert stirred beside me. His skin was brown against the sheets.

"Would I call you first thing in the morning if it wasn't true? I wanted to tell you as soon as I could."

"Okay." I tried to ignore her tone and the sudden cliff-hanging dread that welled up in my body and traveled to my heart's center. *Mom was dying.* "What is it?"

"Cancer. She found out yesterday afternoon. You'd think they told her she has a broken ankle that will heal in six weeks. But Ben's a basket case. Twice he said, in front of her, 'We've only had five years together.'"

I hated to hear that. Ben was too kind to feel this loss. "Is there no cure?"

"Apparently not." Cassie's voice broke. I knew she was having a hard time saying the words she had to say. She was close to Mom.

My mother the artist, the survivor, the balanced woman who raised me, was sick. "I'll call Grandma later today." I hesitated, then asked, "How are you?"

"Oh . . . devastated. I'm sure you'll leave us to deal with this on our own"

I took a deep breath and sighed. I had to keep myself from becoming defensive. "Take care of yourself." It was lame.

"You too." Her voice was empty of emotion, as if she'd smoothed over a disturbed surface, like footprints in the sand washed over by waves. The call to me had been obligatory.

I clicked the phone off and laid down flat on my back.

“What’s going on?” Robert was propped up on his elbow.

“My mother’s dying of cancer.”

He pulled me to him and held me close. “That’s deep.”

Robert holding me made me want to cry. He was too caring, too loving, too possessive, too strong. I couldn’t stop the tears from coming. I cried for Mom, for Cassie, for me.

When the tears were spent, I said, “I need to go.”

We dressed in silence until he said, “Call me after you get out to the farm. I’m here for you.”

I watched him walk down the hall. He reminded me of Tom, walking down the hallway of my dorm. I hadn’t thought of Tom in a long while, and now I was watching him walk away and not doing anything about it, again.

I closed the door, leaned up against it, and sighed. Back to the grind. It was Friday. I had work to do.

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When the day was over, I put on my walking shoes, pulled my collar up around my neck, and started walking. At 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, Trinity Cathedral, which had survived the downfall of the wealthy families who once lived on the grand avenue, was lit up. I was drawn to it, as I’d been drawn to the holy places in the story of Jerusalem—the supplicant prayer, the incense, the art and architecture meant to bring people closer to God. I entered the sanctuary of light and shadow. The three-story timbered ceiling, great stone columns, and ornate stained glass created a place of beauty, and peace. The grand organ’s brass pipes trembled with chamber music. I sat and felt the music flow through me.

I bowed my head in prayer as I struggled to believe God would listen. *Dear God, help me.* It was all I could come up with. I listened with my eyes closed. The minutes multiplied. The organ trilled louder, coming to a crescendo. The musical denouement was soft and lovely.

Outside again, the bright lights of the theaters and people dressed up, chatty and excited about an evening on the town, mocked me. I walked past E. 9<sup>th</sup> Street, through Public Square and its spooky street people asking for money, and down Superior to W. 9<sup>th</sup> Street.

Walking was what I did when I was trying to work things out, a

lifelong habit picked up when I was a child. My mother sometimes walked into town even though the truck was sitting in the driveway. My grandmother used to say walking slowed down life and that was what we needed.

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Mom was in the kitchen when I came through the back door, and when I took her into my arms her usual robust body felt bony, frail. We held onto each other for a long time. When I pulled away, her blue eyes were a reassurance that nothing that mattered had changed. “I love you,” she said.

“I love you too, Mom.” Overwhelmed, I covered my face, moved my hands up to my scalp, and pulled my hair up in fistfuls.

“You used to do that when you were fifteen. I didn’t know you still did that.”

Hair still in my hands, I said, “Neither did I.”

“Sit. Have some tea.” She poured iced tea into tall elegant glasses, and I felt better as soon as I sipped it.

“I wanted to call as soon as I heard, but we don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Call each other. Unless it’s Sunday.”

She reached for my hand and sat down at the table with me. “How did we get there?”

“I don’t know.” My voice broke. “All that work, leaving Cassie with you, not coming back enough.”

“You don’t owe me any apologies.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I forgive you.” She looked at me hard, eyes narrowed. “Now go on and forgive yourself.”

I didn’t understand. “What do you mean?”

“Your problem is not forgiving yourself. I should have said it a long time ago.”

“For what?”

“For everything. For all the things you just said, and for the rest.”

“Some of what I’ve done can’t be forgiven.” I took another sip of farmhouse-style sweet tea. “You don’t know what I’ve done.”

We were so close, I could smell her breath. “I wouldn’t bet on that one, if I were you.”

“But I don’t deserve to be forgiven.”

“You were hurting, and I didn’t want you to hurt more, so we didn’t talk about it.”

I had no idea what she meant because she was hinting at more than my defection from Windy Hill. I certainly had made my share of mistakes. We sat in the kitchen, not talking or moving, until I couldn’t stand it anymore. “Need any driftwood?”

“No, not really. You want to go to the beach, though?”

I nodded.

“I’ll get my jacket.”

We walked, picked up driftwood, talked about the magazine and her latest painting. It felt good to just be together. When we were back in my car, I said, “I thought I was happy. But I drink too much and I don’t sleep at night.”

“You’ve been as happy as you know how to be. You’ll figure it out.” She stroked my back.

“I admire your faith.”

“That’s a good start.”

Later, on my way home to my downtown Cleveland warehouse apartment, I felt the wound of my mother’s illness and the odd possibility that all would be well. Cancer was the one thing we hadn’t talked about during my visit.

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When the weather warmed in late February, Mom and I started going to the beach every Saturday, collecting driftwood like she had all the time in the world to make it into the centerpiece art she sold at her gallery. “I’m living in the moment without trying,” I said.

Mom smiled. “It’s not something one tries to do, honey.”

She was moving slower all the time and getting thinner every week. On our fourth Saturday, she stumbled and couldn’t get up. I put my hands under her armpits and lifted her dead weight. We struggled to get to the car.

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The following weekend, I found her in her bedroom when I arrived. “It’s gorgeous outside, Mom. Wanna go to the beach?”

“You go without me.” She waved me off. “I’m too tired.”

Ben shook his head from the doorway.

“Okay. If you’re too tired, it can wait. There will be other beautiful days. Can I read to you?” I picked up the John Irving novel we’d been reading and opened it to the page where we left off.

But she was already asleep. Her hand on top of the blanket looked like the hand of an eighty-year-old.

Outside her room, Ben had a stricken look in his eyes. “I called the doctor and he came out yesterday because I couldn’t get her out of bed. She admitted she hurts. All over. The doctor said it’s normal.”

Despite witnessing it, I didn’t believe it. But I could still feel how hard it had been to lift her to her feet, how weak she’d been the week before. “Can’t she fight it?”

“She doesn’t want to. Let her be.”

I was sitting with Mom and thinking about how Mom thought my priorities were changing when Mom opened her eyes. Maybe Mom knew, as I was discovering, that I no longer knew what normal was. “Hi, Mom. Can I ask you something?”

She nodded weakly.

“Where’s my father?” I still had a father somewhere out there in the world. It was a great love story until he went back to Italy.

Startled, she turned her head towards the window. “I don’t want you to know.”

Was this stubbornness to continue even though she was dying? “You know then?”

She didn’t look at me.

“Don’t you think I should have a father?”

“Ben can be your father.”

“Mom . . . come on.” My voice rose. I felt desperate. The words came out mean. I could be mean now—time was running out. “You’re being selfish.”

She closed her eyes and turned away.

“Please tell me.”

No answer.

I was exasperated. “I’ll never understand why you would keep him from me.” The rift was still there.

“You can pretend whatever you want to pretend,” she said, changing the subject. “But I know you loved that man fiercely. You were so strange that summer. I couldn’t figure out why you broke up

with him. He called so many times . . . It was a bunch of ridiculousness.”

She’d switched from her love story to mine. I said the first thing that came into my head. “I wasn’t good enough for him.”

She raised her voice and pointed a finger at me. “Jesus H Christ, and you know I don’t swear. He thought you were his soul mate. You were soul mates, far as I could see. How could you not be good enough for him? Who made you the judge of that anyway?”

*Me and my sins. Me and my inability to believe in love.*

“F\_\_ Jerry,” she said as she laid back down. “I should be apologizing to you.”

“Jerry?”

“You know what I mean,” she said as she drifted off to sleep again.

I was stunned. Mom knew about Jerry?

The memory of him washed over me, fresh as if it had happened last week. Thirty years ago and I still knew how his hands claimed my body and used it how he needed to. He left me spent, almost unconscious, with no will of my own. I’d needed him too, obsessed as I was, longing for my next fix.

Why wasn’t God there to save me from Jerry? And if Mom knew, why didn’t she stop him?

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Ben and I were united in our desire that Mom not die alone. A week later, while propped up in bed on a pile of pillows, Mom said, “It’s almost time.”

“Time?” I was confused until I saw her resigned face.

“Can you go get the teacup?”

I patted her arm and turned to follow the path of the Oriental rugs down the wooden stairs. “Almost time, almost time,” my feet beat out as I digested what was going on. My hand shook as I reached around wine glasses in the gloomy light of the dining room to pick up the teacup Grandpa brought home from Japan. I steadied the cup in its saucer as I walked back up the steps.

Mom’s eyes were closed. For a moment, I worried, but she opened her eyes and said, “It’s yours now.” I wiped at the tears on my cheeks with the back of my hand but didn’t try to hide them. “You’re still a young woman. Notice the beauty. The roses have thorns, but they



won't kill you. Do what you need to do to move on to a better life."

"But . . ."

"Oh, I know what you do. You hook up with strangers in ship cabins, on the beach, in gondolas for all I know."

"It's not as bad as all that. It's not as though I sleep with them."

"No, I don't think you sleep with all of them, but you sleep with some. I know men and how they are with women they've slept with. I catch the clues, things like expensive jewelry bought in Bermuda where I know jewelry costs three times as much as it should. You tell me Robert, a friend, bought it for you, while over there to write a story on spas. When the magazine came out, I read your romantic article and saw that the photographer's name was Robert. Out of sight, out of mind, and you move on."

I felt anger flare. My defensive instinct kicked in, but I banished it. I put my head down on the bed next to her shoulder. She stroked my hair, like when I was a girl. My mother was right, and I knew it.

When she was asleep again, I put the teacup back where it belonged. It might be mine, but it would stay in my grandparents' home. I went out the back door to sit on the stoop. The sun was an orange orb above the horizon leaving pink sky in its wake. I hugged my knees in close as I looked out at the farmland and thought about the seventy-acre farm with its frame farmhouse, Amish-built barn and silo, dairy processing plant, and keeper's cottage. The house Grandpa built when he came home from the war was going to be mine. I had no choice.

The daffodils were closed up for the night. Their long slender stalks curled toward the moon. They grew in clumps all along the back of the house on either side of where I sat. Why does she have to die during daffodil days?

I don't know how long I sat there on the stoop. I eventually picked myself up and went back to her room. When she woke, her face was filled with concern and urgency as if she had something to tell me that she didn't know how to say. "I'll hold on to the teacup," I said. "But it will stay in this house."

She smiled blissfully. I'd said what she wanted to hear.

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Ben's urgent cry woke me from a light sleep in the middle of the night.

My clock read two in the morning. By the time I reached their room, he was on his knees, withered and crumpled in the semi-darkness, holding her hand, and crying. The moon lit her smooth lank features to grayness, and her wispy hair fanned the pillow that cradled her head. I knelt on the other side of the bed and listened to her faint breath.

My mother's husband and I waited. I tried not to think about what was happening and became part of the breathing, the darkness, the consuming moment. The slow rise and fall of her chest was reassuring even though the breaths were too far apart. Like God's voice whispering on the wind, she sighed, took a final brave inhale, then failed to exhale. Ben and I sat immobile, waiting. It was as if we were waiting for God to say, "It is done."

A slight movement, and then Ben and I felt more than heard a sigh like the wings of a dragonfly. Our eyes met over her body. Her spirit had flown away. Everything that had come between Mom and me flew away as well.

I felt the old Christian resignation that "it was meant to be" in the way he gathered up his shoulders and rose onto the chair on the other side of the bed. I was afraid to see the despair on his face because it matched my own. We had no words. We were miserable, black-mooded, melancholy. The finality was incomprehensible.

We sat by her bedside until dawn lit the room and I looked out the window to see our caretaker Pedro ambling towards the cow barn. It was time to make some coffee.

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Later, the flashing red lights of the ambulance disturbed the fragrant moist morning. I swept past Cassie, opened the back screen door, and walked out. Anger mixed with grief, a heady concoction. I walked past the barn with the Ohio Bicentennial painting on its side and out through the greening pasture. I continued into the woods along the creek and found the long country road into town. Walking hard took away the anger.

I walked blindly until I came to Willow Beach. As I strolled along the shoreline, the beach disappeared and my feet were in the water. Wild rambling vines scratched my legs as I walked through the brambles at water's edge. The sun was high and warmed me beneath

my loose-knit cotton sweater. I kept walking, my sandals held high above the roiling surf that seemed angry that my mother had been taken away.

While I searched the horizon from the sandy cove, a wave of anger came over me. Mom pretended my father didn't exist. She didn't care that the children at school felt sorry that I didn't have a father and that they taunted me with "bastard child" on the playground. He was a mystery and her dirty secret. I screamed into the wind, "Mom! How can you leave me and not tell me where he is?"

Defeated, I sat down on the damp sand and stared out at the lake. I missed her even in her stubbornness. The waves crashed against the rocks, then the water quieted until another slammed the shore. I was tired. I was drained. I was empty. I felt everything and nothing at once. I was hollowed out. I started shaking and couldn't get warm. I stood up and walked the shore, the sand sticking to the bottom of my feet. The water was cold, but I didn't care. My mother was gone.

Who's going to teach me to live now?

I headed back home. In the shallow valley near our woods, I stopped at the Magical Pond. When Mom was a girl, she believed wood nymphs and pond fairies came out at night to sit on toad stools, climb the cattails, and ride on the backs of dragonflies. During the day, the woods, tall grasses, and clouds hovered over the smooth mirrored surface of the pond that was sheltered from the strong winds startled up by Lake Erie's shallow depth. I sat on the edge, in the shadow of a row of evergreens, my feet close to the mud at water's edge.

My breath slowed as the lake breezes calmed me. I was as still as the water of the pond. "Mom," I said. "I'm sorry I was so consumed by Jerry that you lost him." A goose swooped to drag its feet against the surface of the water. It left a V-shaped wake as it pulled its wings in and glided across the dark reflective pond. A meditative calmness from above rested on my shoulders and drew them down, removed the tension from my neck, and calmed my breathing. My thoughts were replaced by wordless silence.

Ten minutes later, I walked along a meandering path, past vernal pools and skunk cabbage, that brought me to the foot of the old oak tree. The rough-hewn tree house my grandfather built when I was eight loomed above, its unpainted oak siding grayed by the elements, the windows gaping like wide cave openings. The ladder of boards hammered into the ancient oak was intact. I loved having a place of

my own. The last time I'd been in the tree house was during my sixteenth summer. After that, it had been too painful to visit again. And here I was, at the foot of this place that had been a hiding place and then a place to avoid.

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I slipped up the stairs to Mom's "salon," her private space carved from a spare bedroom waiting to be used. The sunny yellow walls bore long afternoon shadows. Her last watercolor sat on the easel by the window, and I felt the ache of knowing she would never add the brush strokes to "pink" the sky of the painting

I ran my hands over the leather-bound journals until I found the last one on the right. The unmarked leather-bound journal after the "2012 —" volume felt solid and heavy in my hands. It was stiff and empty and ready for my scrawling long-hand.

I sank gingerly onto the edge of the cushioned armchair at the antique desk and looked out the window over the fields of Windy Hill. On the first page I wrote "A Meandering Creek Turning Up Muck." That was what my life was, and the muck was pretty much choking me now that Mom was gone.

Sitting with the blank journal in hand, I wanted to get the moment down--the grief, the emptiness, the anger--but I couldn't transcribe my feelings. I pulled Mom's last journal from the shelf and opened to the last journal page. Two weeks before she died, when even a journal entry would have been difficult, she wrote:

My life was not all I wanted it to be, but it was enough. I hope the people I leave behind will think I lived it well. The key is in being truthful, with others, but especially with one's self.

Mom had tried to tell me that I needed to forgive myself for Jerry, for Tom, for all that I'd become since then. Only Jerry and I knew the truth about what happened that summer. I sat down at the desk where the blank journal page still waited, and then I wrote.

Like a kid, I walked through fields and backyards and along the creek until I came to the tree house. I climbed the ladder

to the tree house, surprised by how easy it was. Inside I found the same table and benches surrounded by windows on four sides. The old green blanket I used to nap on had survived the moths and spiders and was lying in a corner where I left it. I could picture the table set with tea for my dolls.

I can't believe how it came back to me. I felt his big hand on my thigh and how my desire rose with the first kiss, light and playful, as we sat on the floor knowing we were utterly alone and would never be found out. He was old enough to be my father, but we spent fervent afternoons having sex on the floor of the tree house, breaking to smoke his imported cigarettes until his tongue on my shoulder blade roused me again and we fell to the blanket and stayed.

Having sex with my mother's boyfriend made me grown up, and made me bad. I was a kid who wanted to be more than I was, more than a girl on a farm, more than the unwanted child of an Italian guy who left my mother, more than Margaret's daughter who talked to cows and liked baking cookies with her grandmother. I liked having a secret life.

I stopped going to the tree house when I stopped seeing Jerry. Was it because the tree house made me feel guilty or that I missed him? I suppose it was some of both. But it was mostly that feeling that came over me all over again when I was there yesterday, the feeling of doing something that was against what I believed in.

“Mom?” I said out loud. “What do I do now?” I waited like we're taught to wait after a prayer.

Silence.

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Mom married Ben on the very spot where the casket rested on her funeral day. Her closed casket was decorated with a spray of roses and calla lilies tied with lavender ribbons, Cassie's work. I was

conferring with Reverend Kirby in the back of the small sanctuary when a tall, blond man in a European-cut black suit and slate gray tie entered the side door of the church. He blinked in the light coming through the stained-glass windows that bathed his face blue and yellow, then walked self-assuredly to the casket, bowed his head a moment, and turned to look around the room, the first mourner to arrive.

I didn't recognize him at first. When he was a few feet away, Tom smiled and held out both hands to me. I felt the blush on my cheeks as I remembered our last telephone conversation and the angry words I spewed at him. His final words to me had been, "I wipe my hands of you," just before the phone clicked dead. Despite our past, he now seemed glad to see me. "Hey, Betsy Kramer," he said in a soothing voice. "I'm sorry to hear about your mother."

I looked away. How was I going to keep the tears at bay? "I'm surprised to see you." I stopped and took a breath. I wasn't sure if I missed him or my childhood or living in this town, but I felt the pang of it.

He squeezed my hands before letting them go. "I came yesterday afternoon because Dad needed me to help install new hardware in the bathrooms at his house. We were driving down Main Street past Dazzles, and Dad said what a shame it was the gallery had to close, with your mother's passing away. I didn't know. I couldn't get Mom or Dad to come--they hate public places anymore. I wanted to be here for you."

I felt the tears well. The statement was so naked, the forgiveness unspoken but lying there between us. The white walls, the sterile gown, the screaming, the grief, all came rolling over me, memories from that awful day were vivid enough to cause me to shake. He didn't know what I'd done, the great sin of my life, and the reason why I had to let him walk away down that long hallway.

He looked at me, concern in his eyes, but I pulled myself up straighter and tried to smile. "It's been difficult."

"It's okay, Elizabeth." His voice was gentle. That he called me Elizabeth made me smile. He loved that name—Elizabeth. Outside of the office, he was the only person who called me that.

"So, your two children are all grown up, and you're a lawyer, I hear." I didn't mention his divorce.

He nodded, absently, his eyes remaining on my face. "You haven't

changed a bit.”

“You’re a liar. I look like hell.”

He bit his lip. His warm hands touched the cold skin of my arm. “Actually, you look the same as you did in college. Small and perky and beautiful.”

“And you still bite your lip. I can see you studying in a pair of cut-offs, biting your lip.”

He waited, watching my eyes, until I said, “Nothing has worked out since you and I split up.”

He reached up to smooth a stray hair from his forehead. I could never resist kissing his hands when we were lovers. “I’ve had that problem too. Do you think it has anything to do with what we had?”

‘What we had’ hung in the air as the front door of the church opened behind us. Cassie, Mike, and Beth entered the room in a whirl of flapping suit coat and crisp dress. My daughter’s lips skimmed my cheek, the baby between us, as she said, “Sorry we’re late.” Mike gave me a quick hug before they turned their interest to Tom.

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Outside the church, while we were waiting for the car to take us to the cemetery, Robert pulled me to him with a disconcerting familiarity and whispered, “You haven’t returned my calls. I was worried about you.” His lips grazed my ear.

I pulled away. “A lot was going on.”

He shook his head. “I thought I could be there for you, but you didn’t allow it.”

I stepped away from him and into the black sedan without answering him.

The day took on a surreal feel as if we were watching other people go through the motions of burying their dead. Cassie and I stood at the gravesite, a foot apart from each other, with Mom’s casket stretched out on the edge of the newly-dug grave. A harsh wind flew through the budding trees. My ears heard voices, and my eyes saw lips moving, but I couldn’t connect the sound into meaning.

In the dining room at the house later, Tom waved good-bye from across the room while I sat on a cushioned wooden chair next to Holly. I nodded. It took too much energy to raise a hand. I felt a tinge of regret that we didn’t have time to talk, and then Maria was asking if

there were any paper napkins in the pantry.

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I slept the sleep of one deprived of it for months. When I woke the next morning, the rose-papered walls and white woodwork were as cheery as they'd ever been, mocking me. Dolls dangled their legs from the wall shelf, happy faces looking down at my bed where I was wrapped in a Victorian crazy quilt bought at a county fair when I was about six. I needed more sleep. My body felt heavy, my mind drugged. I pushed one leg as far down the bed as I could, and then the other, my arms stretched above my head. My body was stiff, my hips hurting as they had in pregnancy. My feet found the rough hand-made rag rug and I grabbed the robe at the end of the bed.

The light in the salon was different in late morning. I remembered Mom telling me her best painting was done mid-day, from ten until about two, because that was the time when the light was bright. I picked up her last journal and turned to an entry at the back.

I gave the teacup to Betsy. My mother gave it to me on a hot summer afternoon on the porch of Windy Hill, probably close to twenty years ago now. Daddy said he bought the cup because of how the girl Emiko's proud brush strokes beautified a plain and functional cup. It was to be passed down through the generations, a symbol of how good life can be—fine and beautiful, a work of art—even in the midst of turmoil. I don't think Betsy understands that the teacup is a symbol of a life of promise. It took me many years to understand life is beautiful when we embrace its blessings.

Mom was right, I didn't know how beautiful life could be—it felt like I was trudging through it, like trudging through muck. Opening my own journal, I tried to understand the teacup more.

Mom hoped I would understand life is beautiful. But I'm struggling for it, reaching for it, feeling that the good life is just beyond my reach. Grandpa may have given Grandma a teacup, but he gave me my private getaway. When he took me into the woods and wouldn't let me look until I was



standing below the tree house, he was giving me something he thought would help me notice the beauty, something that would help me experience myself. When I opened my eyes and saw the house with its blue shutters, I felt life was full of promise. And it was, for a time.

Mom thought that when I lost Tom, I gave up on love. So when I walked away from love, I walked away from the best part of me. What a nice little neat package I could tie up with that. Too bad it's more complicated. Tom supported me in my dreams; when my first novella was completed, he stayed up half the night, not able to put it down, and became my first fan. What happened in the treehouse . . . I wish I could fully describe how it changed me. Too many secrets, too much not being me, not knowing who I was for Tom.

Some things in life are worth fighting for, taking risks for. Love is one of them. How have I forgotten that?

\* \* \*

I walked out to the mailbox by the road every day. It felt like I was in a different century, before the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr., in a time when women still made their own clothes and had their hair done at the beauty shop every Saturday morning while they gossiped. It was 1966 and Grandma told me to go out to the gravel road to get the mail because the mail truck had recently rolled by.

Cards of condolence kept the grief alive rather than helping me deal with it. But a few days after the funeral, I received a small envelope with a Vermilion postmark and Tom's neat script addressed to Elizabeth Kramer. Unable to wait, I opened the envelope as I walked down the driveway towards the house and sat down on the porch swing to read it.

Elizabeth:

If there was any way to take away your pain, I would. I know you and your mother were close—I saw you sometimes on

the beach in pants rolled up to your knees and baggy sweatshirts, ponytails flying, scurrying around to pick up driftwood. Sometimes I wandered into your mother's gallery, and I'd see that driftwood painted and swaggered, looking like gay mementoes. I wonder at the joy within a woman who could create such crazy works of art. When her husband stood up at the funeral and talked about how much he loved her, I witnessed how joy spreads.

It's too bad she had to die when the daffodils are blooming. Your favorite flower, and . . . now they'll remind you of your mother's death. Or they can remind you of her life, if you choose. You are still lovely, but sad. I hope you come to know your mother's kind of joy.

Fondly,  
Thomas

It was a considerate, a try at reconnecting, and it didn't expect an answer. Tom still remembered that daffodils are my favorite flower, even though I'd forgotten.

\* \* \*

It was getting late when I went downstairs to make sure the house was shut tight for the night. Ben was in the kitchen drinking a glass of orange juice. He swallowed, then said, "I know I can live here as long as I want, but I don't want to without your mother."

"You've made this your home."

He shook his head.

"So what do we do with this?" I raised my arms in all directions.

"That's for you to decide."

"It's yours. Look at you. You're a farmer. You have a farmer's soul."

He laughed. "No, I just have a farmer's clothes. And they don't look good on me."

I put my arm around him and felt his rough cheek against mine. "My mother was lucky to have you. No one else could have loved her as well as you did. I'm thankful for that, Ben."

He looked out the window across the pastureland. “You were a good daughter. You came around. Your grandfather made this farm what it is and you were practically raised on it. I know you have your own place now, but this place has to stay with you.”

“Like the teacup.”

“Yes. And that teacup . . .”

“Stays in this house.”

“Yep.” He nodded.

I moved over to the table and sat down. Looking up at him, I said, “I’m not sure I want to live all the way out here. It took effort to leave this town.”

“Sometimes life comes back to where it began. Let the question be there for a while. You need to learn to love the questions themselves.”

I smiled. “Mom used to say that.”

“Yes. She taught me that lesson. It takes a lot of learning, that lesson.”

\* \* \*

So here I am again, at Willow Beach. It took my mother’s dying to find out that there was more to life than what I had. I’m drawn to the soothing rhythm of life and the promise of something better.

An eight-inch long brown-striated piece of wood, smoothed by the force of water, lies right above the water line. I can’t resist. I shimmy between the fence and walk down the cement steps to the beach. The sand shifts beneath my feet as I gather the marooned wood to me.

If Tom were here, I would tell him how the driftwood washed up on the beach so I could find it. I’ll drape beach glass tied to the ends of blue ribbons from the wood and hang it from the ceiling of Mom’s old salon, letting the roots, the untidiness of life, dangle for all to see.

I still don’t believe I’m good at love, but I’m open to it, which is a good place to be. I’m living in the presence of great mystery. Mom left behind her journals, a place called Windy Hill, and a daughter who is learning to listen and wonder and not just act. Yes, I’ve learned to love the questions themselves. And that loving someone is one of the most imperfect things we do.

(Excerpted from *Daffodils and Fireflies*, a novel by Claudia J. Taller)