

MARCH SWIRLED ABOUT THE cottage with the same restlessness that prevailed within its quivering walls. The savage winds challenged the boisterous waves to a violent contest, while torrents of driven rain endeavored to outdo them both. No one... man nor beast... was out of doors. Not even a single hardy seagull, fond of a daring game of white cap leap frog, could be seen. The vicious Nor'easter chewed on beaches from New England to South Carolina as it followed the annual migration of Snowbirds in their snow-salted cars and trucks down the Southeast coast toward warmer, calmer climes.

Inside, a more devastating storm was taking place. A brutal tempest was eating away at Mickie's very soul, devouring the little independence... and pride... still residing there.

Few of the articles she gingerly tucked into the neat row of cardboard boxes were at all familiar to her. They should be treasured reminders of a long life. Happy memories, for the most part. She dutifully sandwiched each book, folder and picture into an available slot. As she did so, she examined each item with curiosity. From time to time, a faint glint of familiarity reflected in her eyes, the same confused half-smile her family had seen from time to time in the past few months. They missed the woman who'd been quick with a laugh and a "dusty" joke or two. Not only was the laughter gone, but she'd become incapable of tears as well. In fact, about the only strong emotion she now exhibited was rage. They tried hard not to upset her.

The aging woman rose from the parlor sofa, pulled her wispy gray hair behind her ears and strode steadily toward the bookcase to retrieve the last item that would complete her packing.

Mickie was, at seventy-four, still physically sound. It wasn't her body that was betraying her, forcing her move to an assisted living facility long before she was willing to be put out to pasture. In fact, her legs and lungs still got her through her daily forty-minute jog between

sand dunes and surf. And she still had no trouble finding her way back to the cottage. Somehow the homing device in her brain was still intact, and it always returned her to her own front door.

Yet on returning home she was often puzzled as to who had left the door open. And just why would someone come in and leave her oven broiler turned on?

"No one has been in your house, Mom," her son Tom assured her more than once.

The diagnosis was absurd. Impossible for her to accept. But when it came in the official words of her own doctor and long-time friend she was forced to accept it. She cursed the God that was taking her mind long before her body and spirit were ready to go.

The move was Tom's idea. Certainly not hers.

"I'm still perfectly capable of living here... on my own," she'd argued the day he'd taken her car keys. "I can get my neighbor to grocery shop for me." The long-time friend's name alluded her at the moment. That sort of thing was happening to her more and more frequently. Even going down the alphabet in her mind seldom helped. ("At least I still remember the alphabet," she often mused, but wondered when even that familiar routine might also betray her.)

"Mom, I can only imagine how you must feel. But we worry about you constantly. You're becoming a danger to yourself. I can't be running down here from Columbia every time something happens. You're forgetting to turn off the stove, and you're leaving your doors unlocked. Bruiser's not around anymore to protect you, you know."

"Bruiser...?" she asked just before the faint memory of her beloved companion surfaced from some dark detour on a back road of her mind.

"But the most frightening episode was the last time you took the car out. You took a right on 17A and ended up in Georgetown instead of Charleston. Thank goodness it was a cop who found you... out of gas and parked in the median."

"I don't believe that happened. You made it up just to get my car," she'd snapped angrily.

Mickie took the worn manila folder from its shelf and opened it carefully. For the first time in several years she thumbed through the neatly typed papers inside.

A rare sense of déjà vu brought the trace of a knowing smile to her lips as she read some of the names: Cyndi. Carl. Richard. Brake. They were names from some vague place in her distant past. Names whose shrouded faces somehow crept into that small part of memory she still clung to so desperately.

Their stories were to have been part of her memoir... her thirty years as a special needs teacher. But she had set the unfinished manuscript aside for some reason she couldn't quite recall. She sensed it had something to do with a devastating event. She tried hard to remember what it was.

Remember. That word was increasingly becoming her worst enemy.

A few other items flirted with her fragile memory. The dainty silver chain in her thin fingers evoked the shrouded vision of a man she must surely have known quite well. At times he nearly materialized from misty shadows into a familiar form, only to fade away once more into a secret dwelling place in the tunnels of her mind.

From the earliest hints that something was terribly awry Mickie tried to keep her mind active. Over time she became convinced that crossword editors were making her puzzles more difficult to deliberately frustrate her. During more lucid years she'd enjoyed a reputation of solving crosswords in record time using only the across clues. In ink and longhand. Now she seldom finished one at all.

Her passion for reading only led to more misery as she found herself rereading the same passages in an attempt to comprehend the written word.

"I'm just too busy to focus," she tried to convince herself when she couldn't put a name to a familiar object or to remember what she was in a store to purchase.

Yet the names on the papers she held rang vaguely familiar. Did they hold a clue to an earlier time in her life? She tried hard to remember who she had been before her mind began to betray her.

There had been a whole different person inhabiting the frail body in an earlier and happier time. One that had loved and laughed and relished all the simple gifts life had to give her. And one who had given back as much as she was capable of giving.

If only she could remember.



STOPPING TO CATCH HER breath, Mickie wiped the perspiration from her forehead with the back of her hand. She dropped cross-legged onto the cool powdery sand. Both exhausted and invigorated from her six-mile run she savored this special time in her day.

She enjoyed the last peach-colored rays of sun as they faded away behind the delicate ecru sea oats adorning the sand dunes and painting the western sky in varying hues of violet and pink. She watched the Atlantic ebb toward low tide, its white caps snapping at the wings of a small flock of snowy seagulls while depositing its shell treasures onto the shimmering wet sand.

A gentle breeze caressed Mickie's tanned skin and toyed with the strands of gray that highlighted her soft brown hair. She breathed deeply the heady sea air, tasting its saltiness in her throat and lungs. She drank in the entire scene as though experiencing it all for the very first time.

The day had been unseasonably warm for early March. Mickie was comfortable in her white, thrift-shop shorts and an old gray Cooper River Bridge Run T-shirt now minus its sleeves. (She got her money's worth out of the "free" race day T-shirts, wearing them practically everywhere except to church.) She pulled off her New Balance running shoes and her socks and dug her toes into the soft cool sand. She picked up a nearly perfect sand dollar from a cache of shells at her feet, examined it and decided to add it to the ever-growing collection that lined her window sills and porch railing.

As she reluctantly rose to her feet to head for home she spotted two little girls who lived nearby. She watched as they skipped and giggled their way through the grassy dunes and onto the beach. Delighted at the large selection of sand dollars scattered about, they dashed about gathering them up. Mickie watched, smiling as the children carefully inspected their treasures. They kept some and tossed others back into the swirling foam.

“This one’s not perfect,” she heard the smaller girl say. “It’s broken.”

An inspiration struck the former schoolteacher as she watched the pair pocket the perfect shells and discard the broken ones. It was the revelation she had been agonizing over for quite some time. She finally had the perfect title for her memoir.

MICKIE NEVER TIRED OF her routine. She relished running on the beach in the late afternoon after most of the “daytimers” had folded their blankets and emptied their coolers. She’d never been an early morning runner, preferring instead a hot cup of strong coffee and the *Post and Courier* to jump start her day. She loved coming to life each day on the front porch of her cherished little piece of heaven.

“I only wish Brett were here to enjoy it,” she often lamented. “How I miss him.”

She and her husband had occasionally talked of buying a retirement home on one of the Charleston area’s beaches, but he didn’t live long enough to see their dream become a reality.

With Brett gone and their son and his family in Columbia the spacious four- bedroom home in Charleston grew larger and lonelier by the day. Although Tom called every few days, and he and his family visited as often as their busy schedules permitted, she suffered periods of relentless loneliness. She tried filling the void as best she could. Writing. Running. Seeing a few close friends occasionally.

But Mickie was most at peace on warm evenings when she would stuff a water bottle into a small canvas sack, lace on her running shoes and make the ten-mile drive from home across the Cooper River to Sullivan’s Island. One of several barrier islands off the South Carolina coast, it was the site of various forts that punctuated the area’s war-time history from the American Revolution to World War II. It was also a place of extraordinary beauty. Once there, she’d park her old blue Pontiac, take a public access path past palmetto trees through the dunes and onto the beach. Then she’d run and stroll until sunset.

On a humid June afternoon in the mid 1990s Mickie arrived for her beach run a little earlier than usual. The extra time allowed for a longer run and she found herself in an area she’d never before explored. There were a number of large, rather exquisite homes that had been

restored... some completely rebuilt... following Hurricane Hugo's terrible destruction in the fall of 1989. She noticed open spaces where homes had once stood, but had not been rebuilt; the very foundations had become part of the dunes, sprouting patches of prickly sand spurs and clumps of graceful wheat-colored sea oats. She watched a half dozen snowy seagulls dip and sway over breaking waves. She relished the coolness of sea spray as it caressed her skin and the crunch of delicate shells underfoot as she jogged along the water's edge. Save for the occasional shell seeker sorting the flawless from the flawed she was alone in her perfect world. Somehow the loneliness she felt at home didn't exist in this idyllic corner of the world.

Mickie slowed her pace a bit as the breeze picked up, tickling her ankles with low waves of dry sand. The sun had begun to disappear behind a thick gray cloud bank when she decided to leave the beach and explore the other side of the dunes. She was soon convinced that what she discovered was no accident. God had brought her to this place on purpose.

The vacant, dilapidated, unpainted cottage that peeked out at the sea from behind a low dune featured a hand painted FOR SALE sign that dangled loosely from a single rusty nail.

"Mom! Are you out of your mind?" Tom couldn't believe his mother wanted to sell her nice comfortable house in the city and move into such a dump. But his words only served to strengthen her determination.

"Maybe I am. But it's my dream house," she snapped. "It's what I've always wanted. And I'm going to have it!" Her stubbornness finally wore him down. Not that she needed his approval. Her mind was set, and Tom knew he had no recourse but to honor her decision and be happy for her.

Mickie sold her Charleston home at a premium and purchased the cottage at a steal.

The cottage was in a better shape than first glance indicated. At least foundation-wise. Obviously, Hugo hadn't wanted it, but neither had its last owner. "Just a little external structural repair work and some cosmetics. It'll be livable in no time," the former owner told her after the closing. Just a little work indeed. New wiring, updated plumbing and new appliances. A couple coats of paint. Sanding and varnish-



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ing the floors. Patching and painting interior walls. Replacing the windows and exterior doors. Addition of a wide porch on the front overlooking the ocean. Mickie hired a contractor to do the work, and she moved into the house three months from the day she discovered it.

“All I can say is it’s a good thing you got a good price for your house,” her son chuckled when he saw the bill for the repairs.

