

THE HALF-LIFE OF PASSION

Penelope had concluded that passions have a definite life span, often short. As her scientist husband, Edgar, would have put it — they have a short half-life. Sometimes they terminate in a storm of thunder and lightning. More often they trickle away over time. It's not exactly that nearness breeds contempt, it's just that passion frequently has indifference as its final state. In Penelope's mind that was the state where Edgar and she had arrived after twenty years of marriage. Facing the facts, she had confronted him. They could share what was left of the upbringing of their daughter, Jeanette, now sixteen. In her senior year in highschool she was headed for college soon anyway. But a divorce was necessary since Penny had found a man who interested her.

Edgar had stood in silence. What went through his mind wasn't clear to her. She perceived indifference, but she would have been surprised to know that his actual feelings were the result of a long held attitude -- there is no point in bucking the inevitable. All you can do is to accept it without malice or anger even if it hurts. That had been the way he had lived since he had become an adult. There was no question that the break hurt, but what good would recrimination do? After that conversation, in Penelope's mind her marriage became a mere technicality.

She had served on the board of the charity, *Benefactors Anonymous*, with Marvin De Toux for several years. She had been flattered when she had been asked to be on the Board. Her blue-collar roots and her education, limited to four years at a community college, had obviously been disregarded in favor of her intellectual talents. Her articles had been well received nationally and there had been talk of syndicating her column. In the eyes of many, she had

become a premier analyst of politics and the contemporary scene. It had been a hard road and she had to admit she had found Edgar's support essential. But that was in the past. Marvin De Toux was very attractive and she had found herself drawn to him. His male charm couldn't be denied. Handsome, always polite, always well dressed, always logical and well spoken. To her he represented all that a man should be. The pull must have been mutual because his interest in her had become obvious. She sometimes wondered what he saw in her. In her own eyes she wasn't a raving beauty and was on the wrong side of forty. A successful divorce lawyer, Marvin, himself had just undergone a divorce. Penny didn't know exactly what his long-term intentions were but at that point in their relationship she didn't really care. She accepted his invitation to spend a week in Hawaii. She quickly found that he was not only very charming but a dream on a dance floor and also very accomplished in bed. In her experiences with Edgar, she couldn't remember such abandon, such delirium.

In their hotel room, Penny and Marvin were intertwined in bed in a moment of ardor when an insistent knocking interfered with their passion. It was Marvin who swore profusely. Penny silently left the bed and covered her nakedness with a robe.

"What do you want?"

The voice of a young man intervened, "I wouldn't bother you if I didn't think it was urgent. It's apparently an emergency. I'm slipping the message under the door. The caller insisted that we give it to you personally. He said that he had trouble getting in touch with you. We didn't transfer the call to your room because you had left instructions not to."

Her cell phone, turned off, had registered many calls from Edgar. She hadn't activated them because she'd thought they were more a demonstration of peevishness at her break from him

than anything of any importance. Marvin had fostered that interpretation. "A husband's last stab at being possessive. Believe you me. I have seen much of that in many of the divorces where I represented the wife."

She wondered how Edgar had traced her and quickly glanced at the sheet of paper. It had been written hastily by one of the clerks. "Jeanette has been in a serious accident. I'm doing what I can, but I thought I should tell you about it. She's presently at the Little Flower Hospital," signed Edgar. It wasn't exactly a summons but that's the way she interpreted it. Her feelings strongly denied that Edgar would send her such a message out of spite.

"Marvin," she said apologetically handing him the note, "I think I'll have to go." She had trouble looking him in the eye.

"Oh, God! Can't you see that it's a trick? Don't let it interfere with our plans! You can just call the hospital and verify whether she's there."

"With the time difference I would have to wait. I don't want to lose any time. I have to go."

She remembered when Jeanette, at the age of about six, and Edgar had hidden from her as she'd entered the house after a long absence. For some reason she had been overcome by anxiety at their absence until a delighted Jeanette had yelled, "Surprise! Surprise!" Edgar had sensed Penny's panic and had held her in his arms until she was able to laugh. No, he wouldn't trick her.

"I won't have you manipulated in that way. If you care for me, you'll ignore the message."

"That's not fair, Marvin. I do care for you, but she's my daughter. I don't believe Edgar would use Jeanette as a ploy to get at me."

She lifted the room phone and dialed the airline number. She made the arrangements for

her return trip as Marvin seethed with impatience.

“I don't think you understand. If our love means nothing to you, go. Don't expect me to wait for you!”

“Are you saying we'd be finished?”

“Yes. It's a test.”

She suddenly was overcome with anger. “In that case you can go to hell!” More forceful expressions had come to her mind, but she had repressed them. She didn't know whether she would be sorry later, but that's what she felt at that moment.

Later, calling on the phone from the airplane, she found that Jeanette was indeed a patient at the hospital. She was in critical condition but Penny wasn't given any details. The call to Edgar only activated his answering machine and his cell phone also could only take messages. Anguish took over her thoughts. What possibly could have happened?

After her arrival, Penny didn't even bother to shower or brush her teeth. Disheveled and tired as she was, she took a cab directly from the airport to the hospital. She dumped her suitcase in the lounge next to the information counter. She was guided to a private room. Although she had expected it, seeing Jeanette stretched out in bed with tubes and wires attached to her was unbearable. She choked up. For a moment she couldn't move or enunciate the words that had come to her lips.

“Oh, honey! Oh, darling!” She felt tears coursing down her face as she tried to take her in her arms.

She hadn't even noticed Edgar, a gaunt, gray Edgar, who quickly stopped her, held her hand and took her out of the room.

“She’s sedated. I’m told the worse is over. She just came out of the recovery room after two hours of surgery.”

“What happened?”

“She was in a car accident.”

“Was she driving?”

Edgar nodded. They both knew that with a junior license she shouldn’t have been driving without an adult in the car.

“Were you with her?” She couldn’t hide the anger that was rising in her.

“I’m afraid not. She just took the car, with three other girls.” He had warned his daughter about the restrictions on her driving. She had sneered at him, but he hadn’t expected an actual rebellion. Teenagers are so unpredictable. Perhaps taking the car for a wild ride was her way of showing her disapproval of her mother’s absence. But he knew better than to raise the issue.

Penny’s response was unexpected. “You bastard! You let her go by herself! That’s how much you care for her!”

He suppressed his rising anger. “Penny calm down. When she comes to, she’ll need you. Screaming doesn’t help!”

All her anger was behind her slap. The smack upset him more psychologically than physically. In all their years together nothing like that had ever happened. But then he forced himself to be objective. Her response was not exactly unprovoked. And he knew well how pain can distort thoughts and feelings.

“Let’s talk about this when we are less stressed. I have lived with this for three days. I know how much it hurts. I know that it’s difficult, but please try to keep yourself together.”

They did calm down. There is no way a vigil can be maintained when angry. She didn't exactly apologize for the smack, but the fact that she acquiesced spoke for itself. Now composed she was able to extract from him more details about the accident.

Eventually, Jeanette emerged from her drug-induced sleep. They were both there, one on each side of the bed holding one of her hands, murmuring endearments. The drip was still attached to one of her arms.

"Oh, Mommy, Mommy!"

Penny felt tears coursing her face and made an effort not to appear upset.

They stayed like that for a while.

"What happened?"

"You're in a hospital. You were in a car accident."

Her forehead was wrinkled in concentration but she didn't seem to want to know more. Penny was relieved. There was going to be more pain when Jeanette found out that her best friend, Jane, had died and her two other friends were also in the hospital, although soon would be discharged.

Edgar insisted that Penny and himself get something to eat and some rest. They slept right in the lounge, they didn't want to be too far from Jeanette.

On the next day, Penny went home for a short while and was able to take a shower and sort herself out. Then she had a chance to speak to the surgeon. It had been a most serious state. Jeanette's chest had been brutally pushed in. One lung had collapsed and there had been damage to the pericardium. They'd thought they would lose her. Fortunately, the quick surgical intervention had saved her. It was lucky that her father had almost immediately consented since

there had been no room for delay. There had also been a displacement of a vertebra and her legs had been paralyzed. Actually, another surgeon had worked on that. That's what the second operation was about. Again they were lucky. They expected the paralysis to be temporary.

Penny should have felt relief and in a way she did. Indeed, there didn't seem to be permanent physical damage aside from a long convalescence. Nevertheless, she was terrified at the possible psychological impact on the young girl when she found out the details of the tragedy.

Penny and Edgar were able to take her home with a daily visit from a nurse and an arm-long list of instructions. Jeanette had to breathe frequently through a strange device. Then three times a week she had to be taken for rehabilitation -- a series of closely monitored special exercises. She soon was capable of walking with crutches, haltingly. She seemed highly motivated in her slow recovery. Fortunately her memory of the incident was still dormant. She remembered having driven a car before finding herself in the hospital, but nothing else.

With Jeanette's return home, Penny was delighted, but it did introduce an additional problem. Out of deference for what had transpired just before her Hawaiian trip, Edwin had slept on the couch. Were they prepared to confide in their daughter when she was in such a precarious state?

"Look," Penny told him, "we can share the same bed. After all we have been together for twenty years and we are not teenagers, always overwhelmed by sex and desire."

Edgar just laughed. "I certainly would love the comfort."

The arrangement seemed satisfactory. After all they were familiar with each other's presence. On the second night however for some reason she had felt suddenly terribly upset with Jeanette's problems. She was crying silently when suddenly Edgar's arms were around her and he

kissed her. Penny didn't remember the exact sequence of events but they found themselves in the throngs of lovemaking.. In the morning she was sufficiently concerned to ask him to sleep on an inflatable mattress that during the day could be hidden under the bed. Penny was not prepared for a complete rapprochement with Edgar, although she realized that the two of them had to work together as they had always done in the past.

A few days later, Penny was horrified to hear Edgar respond to Jeanette's questions. It's true that there is never a good time to communicate catastrophic news, but she felt that they should have waited longer.

"Jeanette, I'm sorry to have to tell you this. Jane died. Dorothy and Meg were hurt but not seriously."

There was silence for a long time. Then Jeanette broke into sobs. Standing on the doorway, Penny felt her own insides torn apart. She felt like slapping the son of a bitch. Couldn't he have left things alone?

Jeanette was now articulating her torment, "I killed her didn't I? I killed her."

Edgar was quick with the response, "You didn't kill her. It was an accident. What you did wrong was showing very bad judgment. We all do at one time or another. What counts is what we do over a lifetime -- the mistakes we make and the good we do to balance them out."

Jeanette didn't seem comforted.

When Edgar left the room, Penny accosted him immediately. "You had to open that can of worms, now!" She had to struggle not to be overwhelmed by anger.

"She asked me and I didn't feel I should answer with an evasion. It felt too much like a lie and then suspecting sometimes is as painful as knowing. What advantage could there be in

waiting? In my experience it's best to tackle issues and crises right away or they will fester."

"You should have waited until she was stronger. And what the hell do you know about this kind of crisis?"

Edgar didn't answer, but he still remembered his torment when in Viet Nam he had shot down and killed a man who turned out to be not only an American but also an acquaintance. The man's crime had been not to identify himself as required, although in the confusion that followed Edgar wasn't sure of what had really happened. His pain had been unbearable and he had found no solace a year later when he had talked to the widow to explain how sorry he was. She was entirely hostile and even rejected the financial help he had offered, the little that his modest means would allow. "Conscience money! You can stick it you know where!" He must have felt the pain for a long time because not wishing to upset her, he'd never told the story to his wife.

A few days later after an exhausting excursion on crutches in the park, Jeanette after swallowing repeatedly asked, "Have they had a funeral for Jane?"

"That was some time ago. They'll have a memorial service when school starts so that all her school friends can attend."

"Shouldn't I?"

Penny responded, "That's up to you honey ... If it won't distress you too much."

"I'll send them a note now to tell her family how sorry I am: 'I'm terribly sorry about what happened' ... No, that's too cold. 'I'm terribly sorry about what happened. I love her' ... I mean, 'I loved her.'"

"That sounds like a good idea."

Edgar was proud to see that the two women in his life were recuperating from their ordeal

showing courage and sensitivity.

With the three of them in the kitchen, after breakfast Penny was puttering with some dishes at the sink when Jeanette asked her father, "After all this, do you still love me?"

"Honey, I'll always love you no matter what. Your mom also loves you no matter what. She also worries as part of her love for you. It's the way of all mothers."

The conversation suddenly went on a tangent, as he had frequently noted happened with his daughter. "Do you love Mom?"

"Certainly!"

"I mean love like being in love."

"That's a funny question. Yes!"

Penny dropped the dish she was wiping onto the sink. Her heart lurched. Had the poor girl sensed something more that would worry her? She was relieved to see that Jeanette had a pleased expression on her cute face and her question didn't reveal some hidden concern.

Did he still love his wife? Edgar felt the woman he had loved had gone through a strange period, but her intensity on Jeanette's behalf convinced him that she was the same woman. Yes, he still loved her.

The start of school presented an entirely new routine. Jeanette insisted on being driven and she lurched on the sidewalk on her crutches. They had to pick her up after lunch for her rehab routine. Mother and father shared all those duties as they had earlier in her recovery. She seemed to be reasonably carefree, although at times her eyes would cloud with regret and tears.

Both Penny and Edgar were concerned about the memorial service, which was held in the school auditorium crowded with students and some parents. Jeanette cried silently when Jane's

accomplishments and short life were described by the speaker, the Superintendent of Schools, but she seemed to hold together better than they'd expected.

There was a small reception after the service. Jeanette found herself facing Jane's mother.

"I'm so sorry for what happened. I loved her."

Jane's mother's face became contorted with fury. "You have the gall to show your face here, you bitch."

Jeanette was visibly trembling under the onslaught and Penny tried to intervene, but Edgar held her back.

Jeanette looked up at the crying mother and simply said, "I also loved her."

Jane's mother suddenly hugged her.

"I'm sorry. I know you were friends. Something happened inside me. Please forgive me."

"Pain can distort everything. You don't have to apologize."

Penny had never expected her daughter to show so much strength and good sense. And the words, she recognized, could have come from her father. She couldn't help feeling immense pride and joy.

Penny was puzzled by the fact that Edgar seemed to be home an awful lot. "Don't you have to go to work?"

"That's something we'll have to talk about. I quit. They insisted that I return to work immediately. It's a very busy time for them. It was after they knew about Jeanette's accident. They didn't seem to care as long as I went back to work. It was clear to me what the choice had to be. But don't worry, I can find another job soon despite approaching middle age."

She found herself saying, "That's terrible," but wasn't really worried. He had never failed

before.

Another crisis was approaching, she felt. Hadn't she given Edgar his marching orders? She had behaved abominably when she had left him to pursue her affair with Marvin. She was also aware of how unkind she had been after returning from Hawaii. Every inconsiderate and judgmental utterance came back to haunt her. And except for their mutual effort on behalf of Jeanette and the unfortunate incident when they'd shared the same bed, they had been very circumspect with each other. They had avoided discussing their plans for the future. She had been happy during the last few weeks. Jeanette's recovery was proceeding as expected. She had been proud of her daughter's courage in facing what had happened. She wished her daughter had had a less traumatic path to growing up. There was no question that Jeanette was no longer a rudderless teenager. But everything has a cloud. Did Edgar really love her? He must have declared his love for Jeanette's sake. Penny was suddenly aware that fear of rejection had something to do with her aloofness toward Edgar during the past few weeks. What did she actually feel?

Her situation was brought to a head when Marvin phoned and asked to see her. The conclusion that he was a contemptible man had slowly formed in her mind, but she felt that seeing him again would provide an opportunity to close that episode in her life. She felt very uncomfortable at the thought of seeing him again. In line with the openness she had held to throughout her marriage, she told Edgar that she had agreed to talk to Marvin. There was little doubt that Edgar understood who he was and was also filled with unease.

Marvin seemed to be somebody from her remote past. She couldn't even understand what she had seen in him. The thought of breaking up her marriage also had been troubling her. Edgar

had shown himself to be all that she could want in a man. Did she still love him? She wasn't sure.

Edgar suspected that he was about to witness a repeat of their previous encounter when Penny had left for Hawaii. There was much to regret. The experience of the past few weeks had at least reinforced their friendship if not their marriage. If they really split up, and he felt that was what would happen, again Jeanette would have to face an emotional disruption. He'd have to explain to her what had happened very carefully. But these days the breaking up of marriages is a common occurrence. She should be able to understand. While musing, he had sat down, waiting for the time when he was supposed to pick up Jeanette from school. It was his turn.

Surprisingly, after Penny's meeting with Marvin, everything fell into place and she returned early, noisily. She seemed to be in high spirits. "Well, that's that!"

"Are you going to keep me in the dark?"

"Of course not. Marvin said that he would forgive me and proposed marriage. I told him I couldn't accept. I love my husband -- love like being in love."

He felt like laughing and crying. But above all he felt joy as he held her in his arms. They went together to pick up Jeanette at school. They were late. Their daughter wondered why they seemed so cheerful and affectionate.

