

## KAREN BARR

### Sorry

There was a time when he didn't have to say I'm sorry. Back when they stood on the cold white beach at Port Townsend, and the salt air was stinging their faces and the waves delivered crashing loads of gravel at their feet. When he had pledged his devotion and she had giggled at the sight of him down on one knee. A time before the monotony and tedium set in, before life became mechanical and ordinary. Back when a conscious choice might have made all the difference.

Sure, there were decisions he should have made differently; tests he should have passed, temptations he should have denied. He had been weak, self-absorbed. Either way, nothing he could have said or done would lessen the pain.

It began slowly. Just little things at first. A slight difference in her way of speaking, tiny bouts of forgetfulness, the carelessness of her attentions, the distractions.

At first, he mistook it. He thought it was a lover, though male or female he was never quite sure. Claire had a magnificent heart, it didn't discriminate. He was angry, livid, in the beginning, but that soon gave way to disappointment and distress. He vowed to pay closer

attention, to make up for his insensitivity, to fill holes that lay vacant. He longed for a confession but none came.

What did come was understanding. Claire was in her prime. Her beauty shone from the inside, out. What man, or woman, could resist her exuberance, the joy in her laughter, the shine in her golden-brown eyes? One eyebrow cocked up at an angle like a sarcastic question mark. Her skin was brown but as soft as the belly of a kitten and she smelled of vanilla and coconut leaves. A small scar interrupted her lip line on one side just enough to give her a slanted smile—like a perpetual smirk. He held no resentment toward anyone who succumbed to her charms.

Her absentmindedness gradually increased. At first, it was verbal.

"What do you think of a trip to Vermont next year?" She'd ask.

"Sounds nice, perhaps in the fall."

"When?"

"Fall, I hear the colors are dazzling."

"What colors?"

"The trees, silly. It's a beautiful time of year in that part of the country."

"Why are we discussing trees?" She looked suddenly agitated.

"The trees, in Vermont. Isn't that where you suggested we go next fall?"

She stared at him blankly, as if the word 'trees' or 'fall' or even 'Vermont' were of some alien language. His attempts to return to these conversations only confused and irritated her more; he might have been speaking Russian as well.

Then came the physical disorientation. Frank watched as she stood in a doorway, unsure of which way to go. When he asked her about it, she laughed it off.

"I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"Everything." She smiled and winked, "I'm probably just losing my mind."

But, he could see the frustration in her eyes. A look of helplessness that was becoming more evident as the days went by.

Claire was always a list maker. She wrote lists of daily routines, lists of shopping pick-ups and weekly to-dos. Lists of birthdays and anniversaries to remember. She started writing things down on a small yellow notepad she kept by the bed, small things, everyday things. Sometimes he would read them in passing and even add an item or two when she was sleeping rather than wake her. Then he saw yellow sticky notes appearing in various places around their home. Reminders on getting dressed and

what she would wear the next day, on the bathroom mirror, what day of the week it was on the refrigerator door. They became more precise: towels on the linen closet, pots and pans on the cupboard below the stove. She made notes telling her when to do the laundry, when to take a shower and when to wash her hair. He watched her decline, powerless to stop it.

Frank tried to keep up with the changes. His frustration only seemed to increase her moodiness. She began walking in the evening, not caring for companionship but he stayed by her side just the same. The engaging demeanor he came to love was fading and fits of anger and depression took its place. He suggested a doctor, someone she could talk to. But she sobbed. So each time he brought it up that he would quickly change the subject.

Then things took a turn for the worse. Claire went to town and called him from a phone booth asking him how to drive home. He found her outside in the garden late one night, crying. He brought her back to bed and sat by her side while she explained she was certain that the peppers were ripe and must be picked before they spoiled. They hadn't planted peppers for close to four years.

By this time, Claire, who could no longer go shopping by herself, got away from him at the library. He searched the rows of books, waited impatiently while the librarian checked the women's room and was in near panic by the time he stepped outside, praying that she hadn't gone far. He choked back tears of relief when he saw her climbing

out of a squad car at the curb. A police officer found Claire walking down the center of the highway. When he asked her address she told him that she couldn't remember the number but she was certain the house was painted in "Mushroom Beige". When he asked her to get into his car, she replied, in her most proper tone, that her husband was waiting for her at the library and that even if he wasn't, it seemed in terribly bad taste to jump into a strange man's car.

She finally consented to a visit to the doctor but only because she had forgotten where the bathroom was one night and dislocated her toe walking into a wall in the dark. The prognosis was not promising, and he cried in the hallway while she dressed. Early-onset dementia, they said. A rare form that generally affected women under sixty. Claire was fifty-six. It would only get worse, there was no cure.

"Perhaps some time distance might help—in foreign surroundings the patient feels more in control. They're not expected to know their way around, and in time, it can lessen the fear and anxiety. Not to mention it will give you a break. You'll find you must watch her closely as this progresses. There is a place...A facility," they said.

Saddlebrook was the name. Advertised as, "An Active Adult Living Community — Find your Luxury Dream Home and Enjoy Resort-Style Amenities — Low Maintenance Living."

He and Claire had looked into a retirement home there at one point, years before the reality of old age began to creep in. The brochure had mentioned “Luxury Homes or Assisted Living with Nursing Care On-site.” They had gone so far as to take a short tour of the grounds. It was a beautiful country location; acres of rolling hills and green grassy lawns with a velvety golf course surrounding a picture-perfect lake, inhabited by a small flock of Canadian geese. It had seemed like the perfect place to spend their golden years.

But at that time they had not toured the “Communal Grounds”. A gated area surrounding a large brick building—stately enough until he looked closely. The curtainless windows were covered by steel bars, a double entryway with electronic locks on the doors prevented any “casual strolls in the garden” by the inhabitants.

The picture in Frank's mind of “those places”—as his mother had called them—was dreary. Outdated facilities, peeling paint, and the smell of urine and death filled the halls. He couldn't bear the thought of Claire living out the rest of her life in such a place.

The doctors had also told him that a just change of scenery sometimes provided a temporary reprieve. He decided on a trip to the sea.

Claire giggled when he told her where they were going. For a moment, he could see her again, her childlike exuberance, her sense of wonder, her joy and zest for life

that had always left him in awe. Then it was gone. Replaced by anger that turned to depression. When he looked into her eyes, he could see the wild-eyed fear that consumed her.

He packed her suitcase, a small blue and white floral overnight bag that he bought on their honeymoon in Montego Bay. He combed her hair and brought her handbag. He helped her into the car and fastened the seatbelt around her waist. All movements so familiar, a *deja vu* of the distant past when she woke in the middle of the night screaming, her bed sheets soaked, and he rushed her to the hospital for the delivery of their first child. How he stood at her bedside and wiped the sweat and tears from her face as she lay exhausted in blood-soaked sheets. How two days later, he helped her out of the bed to bring her home, alone. How she hid in her room for weeks, trying to hide her sobs. How she apologized over and over for the children they would never have. How he assured her it wasn't her fault and that God had a bigger plan for them.

Claire stopped believing in God. She told him that in a matter-of-fact way soon after the death of their firstborn. She told him how she had lain in her bed praying for her child to be alright, praying that he would have ten toes and ten fingers, that he would be able to see and hear and touch the world around him. How afterward she had cursed a God that would deny her motherhood. In his own

grief he had secretly agreed with her and never mentioned God again.

Now, driving down the coast with her in the seat next to him, these memories crowded his mind. At one point, Claire asked if they were going to the store and if so, could they stop at the dry cleaners as she had to pick up his suit for the rehearsal dinner; he bit back tears of helplessness. He wondered if she ever thought of the old days now. Did she still remember their life together? Did she realize that they had been married for over forty years? Or was it, for her, like starting over? If so, would she have forgotten his indiscretions? His weakness?

He had always loved Claire. He never doubted that, nor did she. Even when surrounded by eager, nubile young women in open-toed sandals and long silky hair who smelled of incense and musk. Girls who openly declared their availability for sex without attachment and he found himself drawn into an affair. He never stopped making love to Claire. He had not spent a single night away from her during that period. No making up elaborate stories in order to spend a weekend in Seattle or in a cabin on Whidbey Island. He had gone easy on the drink and dope and had always shown up for work and brought home the money needed to give her a lifestyle she deserved.

A few years after the excitement of Julie wore off and they parted no worse for wear, he found Tara. Theirs was a short, whirlwind affair that died down as quickly as it began, but after that he felt distanced from Claire. A wall

of cordiality took years of bonding over the trials of life to crack.

But crack, it did. And behind it he found a deeper love for her than he ever thought possible. Her never-ending optimism, her determination and willful refusal to give in when times were hard, she proved her love for him in ways that shamed him for his lack of courage. Not once did the thought cross his mind that his infidelities were somehow her fault. He knew it was his own insecurity, his own fear of mortality. There never was a confession on his part. The closest he ever came was on their fortieth anniversary. He gave her a square velvet box with a thin gold bracelet with blue and purple stones. In the lid he wrote, "I'm sorry." When she pressed for a reason behind the words he held her close.

"For all the times I've been a burden; for anything I've done that might have hurt you."

Her voice was soft, "The only thing that would hurt would be if you couldn't say, I'm sorry."

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The air was crisp, just as he remembered it. Their cabin sat on the edge of a sandbank overlooking the lapping waves in the cove. Claire got out of the car and stood, her face into the wind breathing in the salty breeze, holding onto her straw hat, her hair flying in the wind. She looked to him like Mother Earth herself, standing on the edge of creation, surveying her domain. He stood beside her, his

hand in hers, and wondered if there was a chance this trip might halt the progression of her disease. He found himself in a silent prayer as she turned and nuzzled her nose against his neck.

For two days, things felt almost normal. There were a couple of occasions where Claire forgot what she had been doing and wandered down the beach, but the greater part of their days were spent reminiscing about their teenage years and the camping trips to Mt. Rainer. What a sharp contrast those woods were to the fresh sea scents. Her past memories came swiftly and easily enough that he began to doubt the doctor's diagnosis. They collected shells and starfish and seaweed configurations and laughed until they cried, and for a short time, all was right in his world again.

The third day wasn't quite as pleasant. Claire was in a foul mood and seemed not to remember exactly where they were or why they had come. At one point, late in the afternoon, she asked him his name, and if he was there to change the bloody sheets on her bed. His voice caught in his throat as he patiently explained that he was her husband that they were on a vacation at the beach and she had only crisp, clean white sheets on her bed. She seemed to take his explanation as truth and for the remainder of the night although she talked little, she appeared to be very much in the present.

On the fourth day, he awoke alone in bed and for a moment lay sprawled across the clean white sheets

reveling in the pure freedom of the morning. He called out to Claire assuming she would be sitting on the front deck watching the sunrise over the ocean, but there was no response. A tiny sliver of fear dug its way into the back of his brain, not yet daring to show itself in his consciousness as he made his way to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee. The windows and doors were wide open and the cool breeze put him at ease.

He made his way out to the edge of the cliff and looked down at the beach fully expecting to see Claire barefoot in the lapping waves, but it was empty. He traced small footprints in the sand a few inches into the edge of the water and back out again in a zigzagging line as far as his eyes could see. He set down his cup and followed them, the tiny sliver in his head worming its way to the surface. After a few hundred feet the footprints faded into the ocean, the waves had washed them away like an eraser on a chalkboard. He shielded the sun from his eyes with his hand and scoured the beach and sand hills above but there was no sign of Claire.

He turned his attention back towards the cabin, in hopes that she might have returned but it was quiet and serene, just as he left it. His heart began to race, pumping blood into his neck and face so strongly he suddenly felt hot in the early morning sun. He called out her name, but his voice was deadened by the wind. There was no movement on the beach, not as far as he could see. He raced back to the cabin, slid on his shoes and grabbed his keys, he could

cover more ground in the car. Maybe she had just walked on over to the next cabin to introduce herself. It was only about a quarter mile down the road. The car covered that in a matter of seconds. But there was no response to his knock and as he called out in all directions his voice was met with a dull silence.

She couldn't have just disappeared, he thought as he made his way back. There wasn't another cabin for miles, just sand and sky, no place to hide. The place was still empty. He thought to look into cupboards and closets hoping that she was playing some cruel game then headed back down the beach in case there was something he overlooked before.

This time as he traced the footsteps in the sand, he noticed a pattern. They started quite a ways from the edge of the water, tracked almost to where the waves met the shore then back out onto the beach again. But each time they went toward the ocean they went a bit further out, a bit closer to the sea. Finally he came to the last set of prints. They went out into the water then melted away. There was one set that were deeper, still firm in the sand, as if she might have stood in that single spot for a period of time. He searched the water for a clue, some sign that might ease the discerning panic in his gut.

He scoured the beach once again. Further inland, a few feet from where he stood something sparkled, when the sunlight hit it flickered like purple and blue diamonds. His stomach turned and a spike of ice stiffened his back as he

bent down to pick it up. Etched in the sand, next to the gold bracelet, were the words,

I'm sorry.

The morning sun beat down on Frank as he sat on the hot sand, cradling the bracelet in his palm. He watched the long lines of waves rolling into shore further down the coastline, the heat rising from the ground causing ripples in the air, distorting reality. In the distance, at the far end of the beach, he saw the tiny figure of a woman wearing a straw hat, the wind blowing her hair behind her.

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