



S.P. Hozy

**If Only To Say
Goodbye**

NDE Publishing
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“I suppose sooner or later in the life of everyone comes a moment of trial. We all of us have our particular devil who rides us and torments us, and we must give battle in the end.”
Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca*

Chapter One

On May 15, 1976, Joanna Reynolds was reading the section on the Snake personality in a book on Chinese astrology when the doorbell rang. Her husband Franklin was born in the Year of the Snake and she had been struck by the uncanny accuracy of the book's description of his personality. It said he was "self-reliant" and had a "profound sense of responsibility." The book told Joanna that the Snake was a reflective individual and an enigma who did not always communicate well with those closest to him. The Franklin Joanna knew could be demanding and distrustful of others but also soft-spoken and diplomatic when he had to be. The book also said his life would end in triumph or in tragedy, dictated by his past actions.

She was contemplating the meaning of Karma in her husband's life, and how sixteen years of marriage and Franklin's powerful personality had shaped their life together, when the doorbell rang. She opened the door to find a man over six feet tall with broad shoulders and a square face standing there. His moustache was thick and

black and the square-cut, flat style of his gray-flecked hair made him all the more intimidating. His gray suit was well cut but well worn and he wore a white shirt and dark blue tie. He showed her some identification and introduced himself as Peter Morgan from the State Department. She invited him in.

"Mrs. Reynolds, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you." Peter Morgan's bulk looked out of place on Joanna's white, satin brocade sofa. "Your husband has drowned in an accident in Thailand."

Her first reaction to the news was amazement. Not grief, or sadness, but a kind of reverberating shock at the coincidental aptness of the words she had just been reading. She stared at Peter Morgan with her mouth open. All she could think was, God isn't supposed to play dice with the universe. Peter Morgan started to stammer an apology but Joanna didn't wait to hear it. Her stomach was churning like a washing machine and she ran from the room and threw up into the toilet in the downstairs powder room.

When she returned, Peter Morgan offered to make her some tea, but she declined. He asked if she would prefer some brandy and she told him to help himself but that she didn't want anything. She sat down in her rose-colored wing chair, wishing none of this were happening.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Reynolds," he said, attempting to comfort her. "I wish I could tell you there was some mistake, but there's no doubt that the deceased is Franklin Reynolds." He told her Franklin's body had been found washed up on the beach at Pattaya, a resort town less than a hundred miles from Bangkok. He said Franklin was wearing swimming trunks and the only mark on him was a bump on his forehead. The cause of death was listed as drowning.

She didn't doubt that the Thai police had identified the body correctly. Franklin was a high-profile American who had been in Thailand for the past nine months as head of Americans Aid Refugees. When the war in Vietnam had ended, he was appointed

by a Senate committee formed to solve the Vietnamese refugee problem. After the fall of Saigon and the sudden departure of the Americans, boatloads of Vietnamese fleeing the communists became an embarrassment to the American government. People all over the world saw their desperate faces daily on television as they fled across the border into Thailand. The camps set up for them by the Thai government became a nightmare. Most of the refugees were ill, famished and exhausted and their babies were dying in the unsanitary, crowded conditions. The wait was interminable and many seemed doomed to a life in limbo, unwanted and hopeless.

Peter Morgan stayed until he was sure she would be all right by herself. Joanna ended up making tea for both of them and they sat at the kitchen table talking about life and death for a couple of hours. She was glad he was there and that he was doing most of the talking. His wife had died suddenly two years before and he seemed to know the right things to say. As he spoke, Joanna was aware that he may have wondered why she didn't cry. She didn't know why herself, except that it seemed as if they were talking about somebody else's life. It was like watching a disaster on the six o'clock news. Somebody else's tragedy. He offered to call someone to stay with her but she told him she needed to be alone for a while. She needed time to think.

After Peter Morgan left, Joanna went out into the back garden and examined every tree, bush and plant. She pulled a few weeds, inhaled the familiar fragrance of the purple lilacs and watered the lawn. She and Franklin had lived in this same house in the suburb of Oak Park just west of Chicago all their married life. The house had been built in 1913 by the architect Vernon S. Watson. It was a proud house of cream stucco with clean geometric lines and understated detailing that foreshadowed the Art Deco movement. Joanna loved the stained glass panes that topped the second-floor bedroom windows and the slightly arched lintel over the front door.

They had landscapers and gardeners to maintain the grounds, but Joanna had always been the one who decided what should be

planted and she took pride in the garden's oriental simplicity. It was elegant without being ascetic. Each bush and flower, every tree, had a rightness and importance about it. The total effect was one of quiet serenity. She always felt peaceful here, not surrounded by unanswered questions or dilemmas, but filled with a sense of knowing. And she believed Franklin had felt that as well. He liked to spend time in the garden when he was at home. It seemed to refresh him. The garden was the "safety zone" in their marriage, a place where they could be together – because theirs had become a marriage based on separateness and separation. She and Franklin had never had children, more by accident than design. The garden was one of the few things they still shared.

They had not shared each other's lives for some years and she was used to being alone. Now it was difficult to accept Franklin's absence as anything but normal. She accepted Franklin's long absences and learned to cherish her privacy, telling herself their arrangement gave her a great deal of freedom. She wasn't jealous by nature and didn't pry into other people's secrets – not even her own husband's. She believed that whatever Franklin wanted her to know, he had told her. The bills were always paid on time and there was very little of a mundane nature that couldn't be taken care of by picking up the phone or hiring someone. Joanna was solitary and bookish by nature and, anyway, Franklin didn't seem to want her to be part of his public life.

He had been the perfect choice to head Americans Aid Refugees. He was a high-profile mover and shaker who could get things done with a few phone calls and a few words in the right ears. He'd been doing this kind of thing for over a decade. In 1964, he had been part of Lyndon Johnson's anti-poverty drive. He was asked to oversee the presidential election in Saigon in 1967. Then in 1968, he was part of the delegation to the Paris Peace Talks with the North Vietnamese.

That was the first time Joanna had asked to go along on one of his trips. But Franklin had bluntly told her he didn't want her

there. She had hidden her disappointment; he was so adamantly against her going that she didn't even ask his reasons. She just assumed it would be inappropriate for her to go. But he wouldn't let her go with him to Helsinki in 1969 where he was attending the SALT talks, or to China and Moscow in 1972 where he was part of Nixon's protocol team. There were other trips to places like Turkey, Panama and Athens, but she wasn't allowed to go on those either. All these disappointments now came crowding back on Joanna.

In the early years of their marriage Joanna tried to be the right kind of wife to the son of a wealthy, respected Chicago family. Franklin's family owned Reynolds Medical Instruments and were established society people. Joanna's upbringing had been very different. Her father had died when she was four and her mother took the insurance money and put it into a small hairdressing salon on the main street of Aurora, Illinois. Her hard work and determination put Joanna through the University of Chicago where she graduated with a degree in literature. After school, Joanna took her skills to the public library and was hired as a clerk whose job it was to sort and shelve books, stamp them out, check them in and direct people to the washrooms. That was in 1956. The Eisenhower administration was in charge, Grace Kelly married the Prince of Monaco and Elvis Presley sang "You Ain't Nothin' But A Hound Dog." Life was pretty good. By the time she met Franklin, three years later, Joanna had worked her way up to assistant librarian – literature – and got to go to department meetings, answer reference questions from readers and help kids with their homework. She enjoyed her work, even though a lot of it was routine and repetitive, because it was cloistered and familiar and made her feel useful.

She met Franklin at the library's opening of a new history wing that had been sponsored by his family. Franklin's father was a history buff and had bequeathed his entire library, plus a substantial cash gift, toward the new wing. At first, Franklin was attracted to Joanna's quietness. He said he felt peaceful whenever she was around. He wasn't looking for excitement; he already had plenty of that in his life as a junior partner in one of the city's more promi-

nent law firms. Even in those days Franklin was a crusader. He was a rich man's son with a conscience. He took up causes the way some people picked up stray animals. Housing for the poor. Medical care for the elderly. He loved to tell her about his victories and Joanna loved to listen. She couldn't help but be fascinated by the handsome and charismatic Franklin.

It was the attraction of opposites in so many ways. He was tall and patrician, with dark hair and surprisingly blue eyes that seemed to stare into her soul when he talked about his dreams and ambitions. He trusted her because she wasn't flighty or a gossip like a lot of the society girls he met. Joanna had an intelligence and depth of character that Franklin found appealing. She wasn't a beauty, but that meant she wasn't vain, either. She had warm brown eyes and wore her sandy-colored hair short and brushed back from her face, accentuating its perfect oval shape. Her best feature, Franklin said. They made a handsome couple when she wore high heels and a little makeup to hide her freckles. Franklin liked it when she wore high heels. He told her it improved her posture because she had a tendency to slouch.

They got married in 1960. His family didn't dislike Joanna but they didn't consider it a match made in society heaven either. She wasn't what they'd had in mind for Franklin, but she grew on them the same way she'd grown on Franklin. They were talkers and she was a listener. They acted and she watched. She had good manners and wasn't bad looking. Franklin's sisters taught her how to dress and put on makeup and shake hands with important people. Joanna was an able, if unspectacular, pupil and she was what Franklin wanted. Franklin, as the favorite son, usually got what he wanted.

Joanna spent a long time in the garden that day. In a way, she was just passing time, giving herself a chance to catch up with the bad news. She knew the unanswered questions that were not there in the garden would still be in the house, or in other people's minds

or in Thailand on a beach somewhere. When the sun hit the lower half of the western sky, its redness caught her eye and she went into the house. It was early June and the evenings were still chilly. She wasn't hungry even though she hadn't eaten all day, but she made a sandwich and poured herself a drink – an ounce of gin with four ounces of tonic water over ice. Joanna liked to drink gin in the summer and she usually added a slice of lime or lemon. She wandered around the house, knowing she should call people to inform them of Franklin's death, but she didn't feel like talking to anybody.

Before going to bed, Joanna picked up the book on Chinese horoscopes she had been reading earlier in the day. She re-read the chapter on the Boar personality to see what it said about her. She read the words “honesty,” “simplicity” and “fortitude.” It said she was gallant, sturdy and courageous. The Boar hates conflict and confrontation, it said. He's a genial and accommodating fellow who always gives his opponent the benefit of the doubt. Then she looked up the section on the marriage combination between a Snake husband and a Boar wife. “He is mysterious, worldly and profound. She is unaffected, trusting and ingenuous. Their diametrically opposed personalities cannot promise either of them much joy.”

Now Franklin was dead, drowned according to the police report, while swimming from the beach or off the side of a boat. They hadn't been able to determine which. The part she didn't understand, and that she hadn't mentioned to Peter Morgan because Franklin didn't like her to talk about it, was that Franklin never swam a stroke in his life. He was deathly afraid of the water and didn't like going on boats. As far as she knew, he didn't even own a bathing suit. Joanna finally fell into an uneasy sleep, wondering if anything in the last sixteen years had happened the way she thought it had.

Chapter Two

Joanna woke up the next morning just before eight. It was later than she was used to sleeping, but she still had difficulty waking up. She felt as if she were emerging from a black pit and it took her a few minutes to remember the events of the previous day. She felt disoriented and wasn't sure whether she had dreamed the news of Franklin's death or it had really happened. She didn't seem to be feeling the sense of grief and loss she thought she should be feeling. She had woken to a lovely June morning but she had not woken up to reality. She felt vaguely depressed, the way she might feel if she were getting the flu. The feeling clung to her like wet clothing.

She didn't usually drink coffee first thing in the morning but she went straight to the kitchen and made a pot, strong and black, and drank it on an empty stomach, knowing she would probably regret it later. Then she began to feel guilty that she had not yet contacted Franklin's family, hoarding the news as if it were hers alone. She decided to talk to Claire, Franklin's older sister, before

telling anyone else. She was closest to Claire, who was her friend as well as her sister-in-law. She didn't want to tell Claire over the phone so it meant she would have to get dressed and drive the five or so miles to Claire's home.

Joanna stood under the shower for a full ten minutes wondering if she was going to feel half-dead for the rest of her life. She put on a pale green, knit dress with a soft leather belt. It was comfortable and familiar and she always wore it with the gold necklace Franklin had given her for their tenth anniversary. She felt overly concerned with what to wear, but she knew it was her way of keeping her inner self and her outer self together. She didn't want to fall apart.

Were things going to be very different from now on, she wondered? Over the years she had come to accept Franklin's absences as normal. After it became apparent he didn't want her traveling with him, Joanna had started taking courses at the university. She studied philosophy, sociology, anthropology, world religion, anything that took her fancy. She even dabbled in astrology, learned to knit, thought about joining a quilting group but didn't and took some courses in drawing and painting. She discovered she had a modest talent, but mostly she liked to be occupied in solitary pursuits that forced her to concentrate and focus her mind. She told herself she liked being alone. She could garden in the summer and read and study during the winter. She had a few friends that she went out to dinner with occasionally and once in a while they would go to New York for a couple of days to do some shopping and see a show.

And now, all of a sudden, it was 1976, she was forty years old and Franklin was dead, drowned apparently while swimming in Thailand. Except, in all the years she'd know him, Franklin never went swimming. The few times they'd taken a vacation together, he'd refused to go to the Caribbean or any place that involved boats. "I don't like the water," he said, "and I can't swim. It's not my idea of a holiday." So they'd gone to London and Rome instead. Yet, according to the report, Franklin's body had been found washed up on the beach at Pattaya. How was she going to tell Claire?

When she backed the car out of the garage, she saw that the day was clear and sunny and the birds were singing their heads off. It seemed in such bad taste. She drove the familiar route to Claire's Oak Park home, still not knowing what she would say to her. She allowed her mind to be distracted by the beautiful homes that had been built around the turn of the century by some of America's most illustrious architects. You couldn't drive through Oak Park without thinking about architecture, she thought. She had always loved the drive along Chicago Avenue and then down Forest, where some of Frank Lloyd Wright's earliest Prairie Style homes had been built. Her favorite was the Thomas House built in 1901. She loved its precise lines, its elegantly arched entrance and the leaded glass windows with beaded moldings. Before they were married, she and Franklin often drove through this stately, tree-lined neighborhood, imagining what it would be like to live in one of those magnificent homes.

"Who do you want?" she remembered him saying. "Frank Lloyd Wright? E.E. Roberts? Vernon S. Watson? Take your pick. Your wish shall be my command."

"Frank Lloyd Wright," she'd said. "Definitely."

"Are you sure? You know when Wright built a house he didn't let the owners change a thing. He designed the interiors and the furniture and they had to live with his choices. Could you put up with such tyranny?"

"Well, Wright's dead now, isn't he?"

"Only just. I wouldn't put it past him to find a way to show his displeasure. His ghost is probably listening to us right now."

"Who would you choose, then?" she asked.

"I'm partial to Wright myself, but I'm only heir to a small fortune, not a large one, so we might have to be practical – at least for now. I think Van Bergen might suit us. He's unpretentious, like you, and I like that."

Joanna swallowed hard to hold back the tears. I'm still unpretentious, she thought. At least that hasn't changed.

She made a left onto Lake Street and drove past the Unity Temple, taking in its bold, cubist lines. Built to last, she thought. A temple in the true sense of the word. She liked the idea that the modernism of the twentieth century had found its expression in this corner of the world. Even Ernest Hemingway had been born in Oak Park. She felt anchored here. Safe. It was a solid place, sure of itself and proud of its uniqueness. She turned onto Claire's street and felt her heart lurch. She was here to tell Franklin's sister that he was dead. She realized she hadn't called ahead and it hadn't even occurred to her that Claire might not be home. She pulled into the driveway, trying to decide what to do if no one was there. When Claire came to the door Joanna was both surprised and relieved. Her face must have reflected both emotions.

"What's wrong?" were the first words out of her sister-in-law's mouth.

On meeting her, many people found Claire austere and even intimidating, but she was by nature reserved and quite shy. To mask her shyness, she adopted a persona that was cool and distant. Joanna was a bit like that herself and always thought of Claire as her spiritual sister. Claire was ten years older than Joanna and had a graceful maturity that Joanna envied. She seemed to move with time, not against it. She was what some people called an "old soul." She was intelligent and kind and Joanna trusted her. Many times in the past Joanna had relied on her wisdom.

She made Claire sit down and poured them both a Scotch, even though it was only ten o'clock in the morning. She saw that Claire, clearly alarmed by her strange behavior, sensed something must be terribly wrong, so Joanna said, simply, "It's Franklin. He's dead. Drowned in Thailand."

The color drained from Claire's face. "Are they absolutely certain it was Franklin?"

"Yes, they're sure. It wouldn't be that difficult to identify someone as well known as Franklin. He's been in Bangkok for nearly nine months. There must be a whole network of people he was involved with."

"But you know he never goes near the water." Claire's hand was shaking as she picked up her glass.

"I know. That puzzled me too. But the man from the State Department assured me the Thai police did a thorough investigation. I thought maybe Franklin had finally made up his mind to overcome his phobia. You know if he decides to do something, he does it with absolute determination."

"I suppose it's possible," Claire said. "Franklin has always been so stubborn and secretive. He might do something like that and never say a word about it." Her eyes filled with tears as she said the words, but she blinked them away and took another sip of her Scotch.

"Franklin never talked about why he was so afraid of the water and I got the impression it was one of those taboo subjects, so I never asked," Joanna said. She wanted Claire to remind her of the man she had married and to help her understand what was happening.

Claire looked down at her hands and carefully examined the rings that adorned her long, slender fingers. She was looking back to a day in her childhood that had affected her deeply. "When we were children," she said, "we had a summer home on Lake Michigan. We were all taught to swim very early on, but Franklin was still too young and he hadn't learned yet." She told Joanna that Franklin and their sister Ina had been building sand castles under the supposedly watchful eye of their nurse. Maybe the nurse looked away for only an instant; maybe she dozed off for a few seconds in the hot sun. In any case, she didn't notice Ina run into the water with a bucket full of sand in one hand and a shovel in the other.

"Her own momentum must have overtaken her," said Claire. "I don't know how else it could have happened. She may have hit her head with the bucket when she fell and got her eyes and mouth full of water and sand. Before anyone even noticed, she was dead. Franklin probably thought Ina was trying to swim. He didn't know she was dying. The hysterical scene that followed frightened him so badly that he refused to go near the water ever again. The lake

had been so calm. It gave no warning of what was to come, yet, in an instant, it took away Ina's life. My mother just kept screaming, 'My baby's dead! My baby's dead!' We children had never experienced such a feeling of utter helplessness."

Franklin had never mentioned the episode to Joanna. She knew he had a sister who died young but the family never discussed it. They were all bred to be careful and discreet, and not to talk about themselves or their feelings. Joanna knew it was hard for Claire to tell the story even after all those years.

"I guess you'll need to contact Franklin's lawyer," Claire finally said, steering the conversation in a more practical direction. It was all right to talk about lawyers at a time like this.

"I'm sure everything's in order," said Joanna. "But I will have to call Ed and let him know what's happened. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure what I should do. The State Department said they'd notify me when Franklin's body was being shipped home."

Neither of them could grasp the finality of the situation. There was nothing to look at, no evidence of a death. No body to confirm their worst fears. They were both used to Franklin being away for long periods of time, but, if he were dead, surely they would feel some sense of loss. Finally, Claire asked what kind of service Joanna intended to have. Had Franklin and she ever discussed their wishes on the subject? Had they purchased cemetery plots?

"He once mentioned that he wanted to be cremated and his ashes buried in the garden," Joanna said. "I assume there will be instructions in his will." Claire was trying to keep Joanna's mind on mundane matters, away from the unanswered questions that neither of them wanted to think about.

They made up lists of people to be contacted and kept to practical matters. Although Joanna didn't discuss the details with Claire, she knew Franklin had left her everything outright and that his net cash worth was around a million dollars. Even though the Reynolds family no longer owned the controlling interest in the business, they lived comfortably on the interest earned from investments.

Joanna went into the den and phoned Ed Lauder, Franklin's lawyer. Ed was genuinely upset by the news. He and Franklin had been friends for close to fifteen years.

"I'll have to contact Franklin's office in Bangkok and ascertain whether any personal documents are being held there," he said. "I'll call the State Department and the Embassy in Bangkok to verify the arrangements and get an official death certificate." He would call, he said, and they would get together as soon as he was certain he had all the relevant papers.

While Joanna was talking to the lawyer, Claire made coffee in the kitchen. She thought back to the first time her brother had brought Joanna to meet the family. It had been such a solemn occasion, she half expected the shy young woman on Franklin's arm to turn and flee. They had always expected Franklin to choose someone who was confident and outgoing, a woman who would be a partner in his active life. But instead he had chosen a quiet, passive girl who worked at the library. Her mother was a hairdresser or something and, even though she was well educated, Joanna seemed unable to converse comfortably with Franklin's family and friends. She always took her cue from him and was silent and approving, or critical and disapproving, depending on whatever opinion Franklin expressed. It was almost as if she had no personality of her own, thought Claire. She was to learn otherwise over the years. She soon became quite fond of Joanna and learned to enjoy her quiet company. There was substance to Joanna, she discovered, although she lacked any sense of style. But style could be learned and Joanna was an apt pupil. She wanted to please Franklin and did what she believed she had to do to earn his approval.

Claire often wondered why Franklin had been attracted to and married Joanna. It seemed to reveal something about him that none of them had been aware of. Franklin was the baby of the family and, after Ina died, they had all spoiled and indulged him. He quickly learned how to get what he wanted, but it wasn't that dif-

ficult. He didn't have to fight for his place in the family or demand attention. All he had to say was, "I want," and whatever it was he wanted became his. He grew up confident and sure of himself. He never doubted his ability to achieve his goals or his innate power to persuade others of the rightness of his ideas. Yet he had chosen as his wife someone who was submissive and agreeable, not someone who would challenge him or try to control him. In fact, it was Franklin who tried to control Joanna. In time, Claire came to understand that, although Franklin controlled Joanna's outer life, how she lived and who she saw, even what she wore, he was never able to control her inner life. Joanna lived her true life in her mind. She read voraciously and was always learning about things. She was curious but she lacked the experience of life. Franklin always seemed to stand between Joanna and life, as if his experience was enough for both of them. The one thing Claire feared was that with Franklin gone, Joanna would retreat further into herself and the life she lived in her imagination.

"Joanna," Claire said, when she had poured their coffee, "whatever you do, don't brood. Don't let yourself slide. It's just too easy. When Robert died, I couldn't think of a reason to keep going. He left me well off, no loose ends, but the bottom line was he left me. And even though there were times when our life together was difficult, he was too much a part of me to want to carry on without him. I felt I had no right to be alive."

Claire's marriage to Robert Fletcher had been tumultuous and marred by scandal. Robert had been married for ten years to a woman of good family and connections who was a few years older than he was. They had two children and an apparently solid marriage. He had a good position and an assured future as an executive vice-president with the Reynolds family firm. Then he met Claire. She was nearly twenty years his junior and in her last year at university. She was a serious student and was planning to do post-graduate work at the Sorbonne in Paris. But when Robert Fletcher left his society wife and two children to be with her, she

was called a "home wrecker." Their relationship began under a heavy cloud of shame from which it never entirely recovered.

They went to France to try and escape the smell of scandal that followed them wherever they went, but came back after a year because they didn't want to live in Europe. They tried to settle into quiet obscurity. Robert was reinstated as a Reynolds executive in an attempt to save face and they assumed an air of "normalcy" that bound them in a conspiracy of sorts for the rest of their married life. There would be no going back, no admission of error or bad judgment. Their marriage became a bunker, sheltering them from the world outside. They had no children of their own and it was many years before Robert's children acknowledged Claire's right to exist and use the Fletcher name. Since Robert's death five years ago, Claire had become more reclusive, attending only Reynolds family functions. She was close to her brother Donald and her sister Irene and their children. But Robert's children still considered her an intruder.

When Joanna got home from Claire's she checked the mailbox. There were a few bills and fliers, but while she was sorting through them she came across a letter addressed to her in Franklin's handwriting. Her hands shook as she tore open the envelope. The letter was written on blue airmail paper and dated nearly three weeks earlier.

"Dear Joanna," it said, "I've been trying to write this letter all day. I have a lot to tell you, but I can't say any of it in a letter. Things have not gone as I planned and I need to get away from here and sort this mess out. I've been negligent in my financial affairs and made a few unwise business decisions that have left us rather badly off. I will be coming home as soon as I can extricate myself from my responsibilities here. Please respect my confidence and don't speak of this to anyone. Forgive me for being stupid. I feel I've let us both down. F."

Chapter Three

What was going on? The man she knew to be terrified of the water had drowned; and the man who was always scrupulously careful about financial matters had made a few unwise decisions and left them “rather badly off.” Living without Franklin somewhere in her life was going to be an adjustment, but living without Franklin’s money was not a prospect Joanna had even considered. She had always assumed she’d be financially secure. Now she realized she might be facing the kind of life she was totally unprepared for. She’d married Franklin a few years after finishing college and, except for her brief stint at the library, she had no marketable skills or experience. She had only a little money of her own – some unspectacular bonds left to her by her mother that she kept more out of sentiment than financial benefit – and their household goods, some of them fairly valuable but none of which she wanted to part with.

What if Franklin had left a pile of debts? She might not even end up with the house. Was she going to be a penniless widow

forced to scrape by on a pittance? Would she have to declare bankruptcy? Joanna started to cry and hated herself for it. “You’re so selfish,” she sobbed. “You’re not crying for your dead husband or the end of your marriage, but for yourself, because you’ve lost your life of ease.” She felt confused and afraid. Things like this didn’t happen to people like them. What was she going to do?

“You bastard,” she shouted to the empty room, “you didn’t share things with me when you were alive. You didn’t tell me things. You wouldn’t let me travel with you. And now you’ve left me nothing. How dare you! How dare you leave me like this!”

Joanna cried out her anger for a good hour before acknowledging that she was angry with a dead person. What was the point? The damage had been done. It was left to her to pick up the pieces and carry on with her life. But she couldn’t help feeling betrayed and cheated and powerless, and she knew those feelings weren’t going to go away in a few hours or a few days. She wanted to talk to someone who wouldn’t judge her or expect her to put on a brave face.

Since her mother’s death nine years earlier, Joanna’s grandparents were the people who cared about her most in the world. During her parents’ brief but stormy marriage, they had provided the only stability in Joanna’s life. In the years after her father’s death, while her mother struggled to establish her beauty parlor and worked long hours to keep it going, her grandparents were the people Joanna went home to. They fed her and watched over her and put up with her childish tantrums until her mother came and tucked her in at night.

Joanna’s grandfather had been a master carpenter and built a cozy two-room basement apartment for his daughter and granddaughter, using odds and ends left over from other jobs, creating a patchwork of pine, oak and cedar. Joanna could still be transported back to her childhood by the scent of a cedar closet or a freshly cut pine board. Now they were both well into their eighties, a little more careful than they had been in their seventies but still relishing each day and enjoying each other’s company. Joanna

remembered reading somewhere that people who shared the same sense of humor usually had the most enduring marriages. She believed her grandparents had remained friends all through their married life because they laughed at the same things and generally agreed with each other about the things that mattered. Although they were different on the outside – her grandmother was soft and sweet and a little sentimental; her grandfather gruff, even a little harsh at times – on the inside they were the same.

Her grandparents had accepted the fact that she and Franklin had been leading separate lives for some time because Franklin was important. “After all,” her grandmother once said, “you can’t say no to senators and congressmen when they think you’re the best man for the job.”

Good old Grams, thought Joanna as she pulled into the driveway of their immaculate bungalow, she had been half in love with Franklin. He had charmed her the first time Joanna brought him to meet her and Gramps. Joanna had never seen that side of Franklin before. He had eaten oatmeal cookies and drank tea from a china cup with just the right balance of good manners and down-home friendliness. With her grandfather he was formal and reserved and he had treated her mother with polite respect. He called her Mrs. Clark and behaved like the perfect gentleman caller, which he was. Franklin seemed to know how to draw the best out of everyone. People trusted him and believed he wouldn’t let them down.

Joanna locked the car and walked up to the porch, still not knowing exactly what she was going to say to her grandparents. Even as the solid brass knocker hit the carved oak door – her grandfather’s handiwork – she was like an actor without a script, hoping she would do the right thing when the moment came. Joanna heard her grandmother’s slow, even steps behind the door and saw the door open. When she saw her grandmother’s slightly stooped, thin frame, that familiar inquiring look in her eyes and the stray, wiry gray curls that had escaped her careful attempts to pull them back, Joanna burst into tears.

“Joanna, my dear child, what’s the matter? What’s happened?” Joanna couldn’t seem to stop sobbing even though she knew she was upsetting her grandmother. “Owen!” her grandmother called to the back of the house. “Come here quickly! Something’s happened to Joanna.”

Joanna heard her grandfather’s leather slippers on the hardwood floor as she tried taking deep breaths to slow down her convulsive sobbing. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, gulping. “Franklin’s dead. He drowned in Thailand.”

Her grandparents led her gently across the worn, flowered carpet to the still sturdy, wood-framed sofa her grandfather had built over forty years ago. She could hear their voices, one on top of the other, trying to comfort her as the three of them sat down, Joanna in the middle, each of them holding one of her hands.

“Dear child, dear child,” said her grandmother, “how dreadful for you. Owen, get the girl some of that pear brandy. She needs something to warm her up.”

Slowly, Joanna began to feel calmer and started to tell her grandparents about the man from the State Department coming to the house and what little information she had about Franklin’s death.

“They claim it was an accident, that he drowned while swimming.” She didn’t mention Franklin’s letter or any of the problems it raised.

“How dreadful,” said Grams, wiping her eyes on one of the tissues that she always tucked into the sleeve of her sweater. “I’m going to miss him,” she sighed. “You know, it almost makes you believe what they say, that only the good die young.”

Joanna heard a barely audible grunt from her grandfather as he leaned forward to pour a little more brandy into her glass. “What about Lyle?” he said. “That would seem to disprove the theory, wouldn’t it?”

“Now Owen,” Grams said to him, a note of warning in her voice. “This is not the time to bring that up.”

There was no love lost between Joanna’s grandparents and her

father, though she never heard the specific reasons for this. Her father was a car salesman – used cars – and they believed their beautiful young daughter had thrown her life away on the fast-talking, slick young man from Grand Rapids. Slick. That was the word her grandfather always used to describe him. “He was slick. Didn’t trust him as far as I could spit.”

But Joanna never heard any of this until after her mother died. Then they had felt the need to talk about her and her life. Joanna never even knew whether her parents had loved each other. She was only four years old when her father was killed while out on a test drive in one of the used cars he was trying to sell to a college student. The brakes had failed and both her father and the student had died instantly. After that, he was never mentioned and, for a long time, Joanna kept expecting him to walk through the door of her grandparents’ house and say, “Come on kiddo, we’re going home.” Her only real memory of him was how the light used to shine on his straight, slicked-back hair.

“Come into the kitchen, dear,” she heard her grandmother saying. “You need to eat something. You’re white as a sheet.” Joanna tried to protest but knew her grandmother was right. The brandy, on top of the scotch and the coffee she’d drunk at Claire’s, had left a burning sensation at the bottom of her stomach. Her grandmother started to heat up some cream of chicken soup – made with milk, not water – and Joanna sliced some of the fresh homemade bread they had been buying for years from Bernstein’s Bakery. She felt herself starting to slow down, like someone coming home after a hard day’s work in the hot sun. They sat around the maple table on chairs her grandfather had built and ate the soup and bread, talking quietly about the past and about Franklin.

“Who would ever have thought my daughter and granddaughter would both be left widows and me still married to the same man for over sixty years,” Grams said, looking at Joanna sadly. “When you married Franklin I thought it was the most wonderful thing in the world. Now she’s set, I told myself, set for life. She’ll never know poverty or unhappiness again. Maybe I jinxed it then and there.

You should never say things like that, not even to yourself. Sure as God made cherry pits, your words’ll come back to haunt you.”

“Don’t be an old fool,” Gramps said gently. “You know it doesn’t happen that way. If this is what Joanna’s life was meant to be, then she’ll have to live with it. At least you were partly right, though. She won’t know poverty.”

Joanna couldn’t bring herself to tell them about Franklin’s letter. She didn’t even know if she would still have her home or any money at all. Her grandparents had told Joanna when she married Franklin that, if anything happened, she’d always have a home with them. The Depression had been hard on them but they had managed to hold onto their small house and didn’t hesitate to take Joanna and her mother into their home after her father died in 1939. They respected their daughter’s privacy by building her and Joanna the small apartment, but they were never more than a word away. Joanna knew they would not hesitate to take her back if that’s what she wanted.

“If only Franklin had let me go to Thailand with him maybe things wouldn’t have turned out this way.”

“Now don’t you start being foolish like your grandmother,” said Gramps. “What’s happened has happened and you’ve got to accept it.”

“Oh, Owen, don’t be hard,” her grandmother said. “I’m sure Joanna knows that well enough. Child, do you remember when Franklin came back from Japan the time they sent him on that fact-finding mission? He brought me back a pearl inside an oyster shell. And he said to me, ‘Do you know what this oyster shell represents for me, Grams? It’s this beautiful home that you and Gramps have built. And inside is a beautiful, perfect pearl and that’s Joanna. Now every time you look at this oyster shell you’ll know I haven’t taken Joanna away from you. She’s as much a part of your home as this pearl is a part of this oyster.’ I still have that oyster shell and I think of Franklin every time I look at it. And of you, my dear, because you are the perfect pearl at the center of our life.”

They cried a little more and then her grandparents made Joanna lie down for a while and she fell asleep under a handmade quilt. When she woke up, her grandmother had cooked a chicken and they ate it with mashed potatoes and carrots. Joanna still felt a little dazed and, though they tried to persuade her to stay, she wanted to go home and be alone for a while. They hugged and kissed and her grandmother wrapped up the leftover chicken and made Joanna take it home. “You won’t feel like cooking,” she said, “and I know you’ll forget to eat.”

On the drive home, Joanna tried to concentrate on the traffic instead of her thoughts but she kept thinking about the pearl in the oyster, a small, private episode between Franklin and her grandmother that she’d never known about. There were so many sides to Franklin’s nature that she hadn’t known – partly because he hadn’t let her. To her he was a husband and provider and she became the kind of wife he wanted. Franklin made the rules and Joanna lived by them. What had she missed by not being a bigger part of his life?