

Window on Tomorrow

by

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Polly Harris sat on a packing crate, eating cheese crackers for dinner. The kitchen remodel was dragging on—special-order cabinets gathered dust in the midst of rugs, furniture, and china barrels, and forty boxes of books waited for the carpenter to build the shelves.

By now she should have settled into the handsome apartment she had bought with such hope. Hope that with time she would cure her loneliness with work, face her paintings critically, immerse herself in trying new forms, new colors, fresh ideas. She was acutely aware that it was put-up or shut-up time. Nobody was stopping her. No one but you, Polly.

Yet here she was, burrowing through the clutter without gaining on it. Of course not: the clutter was of her own making, her hiding place from the real world. She was surrounding herself with objects she rarely used, family accretions bequeathed to her to drag around and finally pass on. She had pitched herself bodily into a new urban scene, but in her mind and heart she was still down county. She couldn't stop thinking of the rooms in the country house and every object in them. Couldn't stop picturing the vegetable and flower gardens that grew bounteous and more spectacular each year.

When would she let it go, bury it all with George?

Get a grip, Polly. Stop wailing about widowhood and inability to cope. You had to cope plenty when George was alive. Remember?

Only one month since she'd sold the house on Maryland's western shore. She had loved their cove and its soybean and corn fields and fringe of dark woods. Winter light on the brown fields, hot summer sun that cracked the lanes, soft air and crashing storms. George wrote

adventure novels that sometimes became movies, and he supported them well. Polly, a painter never satisfied with her work, stacked canvases in her studio closet, bringing them no income at all. Why are you so self critical, Polly?

They raised a lively boy who grew up to be an actor Off-Broadway until his big break; a blonde tomboy, rambling world-wide with a camera on her back; and George's near clone, who was hiding out in a cabin in Bethel, Maine, to write his own life story. They sailed the Bay, built gardens, a greenhouse and dock, repaired barns and conned themselves into laying out a vineyard. Here in this sanctuary, they lived through thirty years of battles and passion, pain and satisfaction. A marriage.

"If you weren't so funny," George once said, "I would probably kill you, but those stork legs and brown eyes can still knock me over and slow down my habit of wandering. I guess we're stuck with each other, old girl."

"Golly, no reprieve," she laughed, and took off.

"Thanks, sport," George called. "Good scene. I'll keep it in mind."

Sometimes George's "habit of wandering" haunted Polly, but reason would return after a good night's sleep. George was in her bed every night, for heaven's sake; he did his roaming and fantasizing in his office.

Everything with writer George was a scene: good, bad, wow, a whole act, indifferent, won't wash. That short passage between husband and wife was good enough to show up in his next book, nearly word-for-word. He was the hero in all of his books, the lovable black-haired, handsome, rascalion rogue, but you couldn't type his women; they were big tits, flat chests, blond, chestnut raven, blue-eyed, green-eyed, short, tall, even fat, on occasion. He had the painter's eye for the landscape—hey, that's a scene, that's the whole act! Keeping up with George was a trip.

Then came the year when George was sixty, yet he looked so young. There was something totally unfamiliar about his frenetic behavior and sudden exhaustion. Without being told, and ahead of the doctors, she knew he was ill. It was cancer.

“Take me in tomorrow,” George told the doctor, “and dig it out, you’re a good sawbones.”

“We did what we could,” the surgeon told Polly. “We’ll let him rest and then try radiation and chemo.”

George’s denial was agonizing to watch. Polly could only stand by while he raised a wall between them, made jocular passes at their women friends, drank too much, took off on unexplained errands, came home and prowled until dawn. Where did love go, Polly wondered? Why can’t I remember our closeness, time without pills?

Then, abruptly, the wall evaporated. One night George wept in her arms. “Forgive me, Polly, I’m wasting what we have left.” Their real marriage—and they had three more years of compassion, knowing, and understanding—began. He told her how to work with his publishers. He made her promise to sell the house. “The place is far too big for you alone, you’ll need the money. My royalties will dry up eventually, and you’d have to use up savings.” But my friends, she thought. What will I do without them?

They agreed he would stay at home. Here she would bathe him, measure his medicine, bring him his trays, and do her best to protect him from the indignities of dying.

At the height of his pain, he came slowly across the house at dusk, calling her softly. “Love,” she said, “what are you doing, why did you get out of bed?”

“Because you need me.”

They stood together for a long while, the last time he held her.

The children came for the funeral and went away. Lord save her from living with them, but couldn’t they see how much she needed their affection and support just now? Where, in the

time remaining, could a woman pushing fifty-five build another life as satisfying and enriching, painful and difficult as the one that had just been lost?

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For months Polly Harris never stopped talking and never finished a sentence. Her incessant prattle was lineal, a few feet in the air with only an occasional touchdown. She exhausted everybody with reminiscences of walks with her husband and their beloved corgis, whose coats were the color of the autumn fields.

“Let her rip,” Polly overheard her friend Carrie say, when she came late to a luncheon. “She has to talk the late Saint George back down to size while she figures out what next. I think she should turn her place into a bed and breakfast.”

“Thanks, but no thanks, Carrie,” Polly said, slipping into a chair. “Miz Polly’s run enough breakfasts for this life.” She looked at her friends wickedly “I’m going to learn to be on time so I can hear the gossip and not be it. You know I, too, have such interesting tales to spread.”

“So, do,” they said.

“Just kidding.” Polly was not about to reveal whose husbands had been coming down her lane to offer special condolences to the new widow. Did they know, these women whom she could never thank or repay, who had taken over her house, made the phone calls, arrangements for the funeral and memorial service as she wished, prepared the mountains of food for out-of-town guests, seen to it she had something decent to wear, and a knockout pill for the hard nights, did they know which husbands were up for dalliance? Was she imagining it, or did some of her friends wonder if she was going to annex a husband from the present pack?

George, were you a gentleman caller, too? Have I really been making you a saint?

When she arrived home, she looked at herself in the hall mirror. There she saw a shocking stranger. During the last months of nursing George, she had been indifferent to her looks. How had she let herself become this mass of wrinkles and hapscraggle hairdo?

Clearly this was clean-up time. She skinned down, bought high fashion, used makeup again. She was noticed. "What is Polly up to? She must be looking around."

"You turn heads," said one dinner date.

When it came down to the wire, however, the past encased her. Having men as friends again was good for her ego, but *she* was still hooked on George.

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Then, as a weekend guest in Annapolis, she met sandy-haired and lanky Adam Harlan, who gave her no chance to run. They were both widowed, immediately in tune. She felt his quiet strength, reveled in his simple kindness, yet tried to put him off. "Why me, Adam, when you can have your pick?"

"Of course I can. Available women grow on every tree, but you're old enough to know me, as I know you. You are an adventure, Polly."

He was restless. "Keep your passport handy," he would say, sending her a ticket to meet him in Paris, Vienna, Copenhagen, or the Bahamas.

She stood with him one early evening on the Pont Neuf, in the middle of the bridge, both of them a little sad. All of Paris surrounded them as the sun went down. "The most beautiful city in the world," she said, "to coin a phrase."

He smiled and put his arm through hers as they leaned on the parapet, gazing at the water. "Ah, Lucia, what we have missed," he said softly. "I bet you know that one, too."

"The Ghost and Mrs. Muir," said Polly promptly. "A favorite movie.

She loved best the visits to his cabin in the mountains. Long walks and sketching while he read. Taking turns cooking. So much to say. Laughing a lot. She rebuilt her life around him.

For three-and-a-half years she told seamless fibs: up to town to shop, see a play, the children. Then she'd run off to meet Adam. She kept him to herself; no girlish confidences. While no one shared her secret, they would not know, either, if or when this delightful man she loved left her.

It happened. In Bermuda, in early January. Middle of the day, pool-side. Half an avocado filled with chicken salad. Rum punch. Lazy. Her skin warm and redolent of sun oil. She looked across the table at his dear face.

“What shall it be?” she asked. “Long swim? Nap? Both?”

He smiled at her with love. She would swear it was love, so different from what they both had had in the past. “Dearest,” he said, “you are the only woman in the world who can pack and take off to the ends of the earth in twenty minutes. In all my years, you have been my best lover, my best companion. We both understood the nature of grieving and healed each other. It's time now for you to marry some good man. Soon.”

She remembered looking out at the water and feeling so cold. She could have cut off her arm and thrown it over the wall with no pain. Hold on to yourself, Polly. Don't be shrill. No scenes. “My dearest,” she said, as lightly as she could, “where is the aberrant man who is going to marry a woman of my age and look forward to attending her last illness? Truth, Adam. That's what frightens you?”

“Matter of fact, no. I'd make book that for us it would be you who would get the duty again, and I will not do that to you, period.”

In the same way that he had enclosed her in his life, he now withdrew, lid on the box. Done. Something was very wrong. Was he ill? They were, after all, too new to each other for her to make an educated guess, still she knew and refused to accept it. How could he put her off to

face his pain alone? What could she say or do to hold him? “Why now, Adam, all of a sudden?” she asked. “I’ll stop guessing if you tell me.”

There was no answer.

Before he put her in a cab at the Washington airport, she could not stop trembling in his arms. He tried to comfort her, rocking her gently like a child. “Dear Polly. Isn’t it enough we loved each other?”

A second death.

Was this her punishment for outliving George to love another man with more affection, truth be told, than she had felt for her husband?

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With Adam truly gone, Polly concentrated on selling the property. Money was being drained to pay for all the heavy work that George did. There were suddenly neckers and beered-up kids in her long driveway, and since everyone knew she was alone, she acquired a peeping Tom. The sheriff laughed. “Hell, Polly, face him down, it’s probably somebody’s idea of a joke.”

“It’s not funny. When I know he’s there, my back hair stands up, and I can’t breathe. This house is all windows, anyone can practically walk in, you know that.”

The sheriff promised to keep checking on her, but he had a big county to cover. “Wouldn’t hurt,” he said thoughtfully, “to call the electric company to flood your grounds with automatic night lights.”

Finally one night, when she went into the living room to hear the late news and stepped on a little corn snake, Polly broke down. She was being run off her turf. She wanted to have one more quiet season of crocus and daffodils, her garden a cloud of white, yellow, and purple, but a buyer appeared and she had to be out by the end of May. She stopped eating regularly, made and lost endless lists, dozed in a different bedroom every night then woke up and walked around in

the dark. No need to turn on any lights. She knew every step and door knob, an old skill learned from nights tending babes.

She gave the children what they wanted and auctioned off some of the best furniture. A good necklace was lost, but she had all of her potted plants and personally collected rocks and shells. She held a yard sale, sent truck loads to the church bazaar; she gave away sheets, odd glasses, garden ornaments, and cherished objects for remembrance. Soon, wherever Polly went for dinner, she sat in one of her own chairs, ate food cooked in her pots, admired George's collection of decoys as if she'd never dusted them.

Depression of a kind she had never experienced consumed her.

Carrie phoned. "How's it going?"

"Marvelous." Polly hung up.

The phone rang again. "We had a bad connection."

Carrie was pleasantly chatty, but Polly could feel a pep talk forming. "I hope you're not about to suggest something," she said. "I'm not up for it, today. The connection was perfectly okay, I hung up on you. I don't need advice, and I don't want to have to tell you to back off."

"All right, Polly, I'm just trying to divert you. Give me a progress report before I quit. Any clear surfaces?"

"I'm waiting for the packers and the oil man. They're dawdling. The house is a raving mess. My cleaning crew is not here. Will I ever get to my new place? I want to get out of neutral and stop mourning the late Polly Harris."

"Who?"

"Surely you remember Polly—with husband, three nifty kids, boat and grapes, whose headstone will read: 'wife, mother, then what?' When last heard from, she was diminished, you might say. Not even half a Harris, only a certified wanderer in the city."

“Polly.”

“George never would have moved, he’d have made more money and set a new and younger Polly in my place. New adventure. Good scene. The whole act. Right? Damned right I’m right. How many widowers do you know who have remained so for more than a year before they introduced fresh and stimulating new companions to the group?”

“*You* are feeling sorry for yourself. Listen, I can drive over . . .”

“Please,” Polly said. “Don’t.”

At last the movers came. She walked through the empty rooms, inspecting each one. Not an echo of voices, music, or footsteps.

I am really leaving you, George. I am really leaving me.

She picked up her last suitcase and a bouquet of flowers and dried herbs from her garden, and left. What next? To a new life in the city she chose. Now that she was indisputably on her own, she promised herself to breathe deeply and try to summon the energy she once had to meet whatever was out there, around the curve in the road.

Carry the flag, Polly. Good scene.