Harry, Pass By

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Abstract

It had been on a Friday night nearly two months after his death that Sara first began to feel that she was no longer alone in the house...
Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.

HARRY, PASS BY

by

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Speech 2

It had been on a Friday night nearly two months after his death that Sara first began to feel that she was no longer alone in the house. She'd spent an entire afternoon in preparation of her favorite meal (lobster, tossed salad with homemade croutons, and fresh rolls with lots of real butter) and was just unfolding her napkin when she felt it—a prickling sensation up and down her spine. Someone was watching her. Turning quickly, she peered into the blank face of the familiar Grandfather clock behind her, innocently marking the minutes as it had always done. Nothing there. Of course not. “You silly old goose.” Chiding herself, she turned back to her meal. Lobster was certainly an expensive treat—only one of those luxuries that she could never have had while Harry was alive. She'd loved it ever since her first taste as a girl while on vacation in Maine. Harry had known of her passion. Indeed, he'd often taken her out for lobster dinners while they were courting. Once married, however, his willingness to indulge her little whims had slowly been replaced by an ever-growing obsession with saving money. Since canning vegetables at home was so much cheaper than buying them at the grocer's, he'd insisted that Sara start a garden. Never mind that she'd never even canned before. New clothes were also an unnecessary expense, and she soon found herself wearing dresses until the elbows wore through. Even her wedding dress had been recycled.

Sighing, Sara sipped her wine from the crystal goblet and took a second roll from the basket. Using the fine china and eating in the dining room were two additional indulgences that she'd allowed herself since Harry wasn't there to catch her. In fact, she'd been taking quite a number of liberties lately, such as having her hair done every Monday and Thursday and buying herself a new dress to wear to church.
Although the dress itself had actually been a necessity, since she'd gained at least ten pounds in the past two months.

There it was again. The tingling feeling shivered up and down her spine and she seemed to feel reproachful eyes boring straight into her back. Slowly, Sara again looked behind her, fighting a heavy feeling of dread. The room was empty. "This is ridiculous. There's nobody here but you." Her words echoed in the unnaturally still room. Uneasily, she returned to her meal, but the lobster now had a fishy taste and the croutons had gone soggy. Sara tried to finish her food, but the enjoyment was gone. In fact, she suddenly felt guilty for even buying something as expensive as lobster. After all, it wasn't something that could be used more than once, and she certainly didn't deserve such a delicacy after gaining ten pounds. And the wine! Harry would be tearing his hair if he knew. Hastily, she cleared the table and put the dishes in the sink, promising herself that she'd wash them in the morning. Perhaps she needed to go to bed early. Most likely this uneasy feeling of being watched was due merely to fatigue.

Once in her old bathrobe, Sara felt much better. Bed looked inviting, but vanity prevailed and she seated herself in front of the mirror, ready to go through the ritual of creaming her face. Since Harry's death, she'd replaced the old, cheap cold cream with a night cream by Esteé Lauder. Yet another small treat, but one that she truly relished. The wrinkled face squinting back at her was at once familiar and unfamiliar, since the same round cheeks and faded blue eyes were now framed by freshly-permed white curls instead of the old scraggly bun. Cutting her hair had given her a devilishly youthful sense of freedom. Harry hadn't believed in either make-up or permanents, and he'd even ridiculed Sara for creaming her face at night. She'd compromised by buying the cheapest products in town. This new, costly cream was so much nicer.

Smoothing it on, Sara flinched. Surely someone was looking over her shoulder. A tremendous wave of disapproval washed over her. It was as if Harry were standing there in the usual way—hands on his belt and a sneer on his lip. Goodness! Was that a sniff she heard? Over the years he'd perfected a
scornful sniff which he employed whenever Sara had been "extravagant," and she'd grown to despise it. "Sara, was this really necessary?" he would ask.

"Yes, Harry. I deserve this cream, and you have nothing to say about it." Feeling suddenly defiant, Sara snitched two chocolates from the box beside her bed and slid between the sheets. The atmosphere had lightened, and she realized that she no longer felt as if someone were with her in the dingy bedroom. Despite the early hour, she was soon asleep.

The next morning, she awoke feeling chilled, and no wonder—the thermostat was set at 62° instead of Sara's usual 75°. "I must have bumped it in passing," she assured herself, yet how could that be? The thermostat was in the living room and she hadn't even been near it, having instead gone straight to bed. Last night, the cramped little house had been as warm as toast. Of course, she probably shouldn't be setting the thermostat so wastefully high. For years, Harry had kept the temperature at 68°, and when gas became tight, he'd moved it down to 65°. Anything to save money. Sara felt the cold more and more as she grew older, and one of the first things she'd done the week after his funeral was to move the thermostat up to 75°.

That Saturday morning, she busied herself with housecleaning and laundry. While dusting the living room, she found a copy of The Weekly Reminder tucked under one of the sofa cushions. "What on earth?" She knew for a fact that she'd thrown that copy away when it was delivered last Monday, yet here it was on the couch. The Reminder, a paper supplying a list of the weekly specials at the grocery store and a book of coupons, was delivered to their door every Monday at Harry's insistence. For years, their meals had consisted of whatever happened to be on special. After all, Harry had done the shopping himself. Sara hated to think of all the hotdogs and Kraft macaroni and cheese dinners that she'd consumed over the years. "Is it really so terrible to enjoy a steak dinner every so often?" she'd once asked him. "We can afford it, you know." Harry had responded by railing at her extravagance and wasteful habits. "Don't you know that I have to work for every cent we spend? If we did things your way, we'd be in the
poor house by Thanksgiving." Totally cowed, Sara had never brought up the subject again, but she'd secretly consoled herself all those years with the thought that, if she succeeded in outliving him, she would have anything and everything that she wanted to eat. Doing her own grocery shopping was a delight, and every week she experimented with something new. And why not? She had been assured after Harry's death that she had more than enough to live out the rest of her years in style. "Why not travel, Mrs. Huffman?" that nice young attorney had suggested. "You certainly must have lived a frugal life to have saved so much money over the years." "You don't know the half of it," she'd snorted to herself.

Well, all this reminiscing wasn't getting the dusting done, and she still had lunch to fix and the grocery shopping to do. Sara gleefully ripped The Reminder in half and stuffed it into the garbage. At once, a feeling of deep guilt overwhelmed her, and she could feel those angry eyes on her back. Whirling around, she faced Harry's picture. She stared at the close-set eyes and narrow lips of her coldly smiling husband. Why did his eyes seem so accusing? "You were a tight old goat. Do you know that?" As if in answer, a door slammed from somewhere upstairs. Sara jumped. "Harry? I didn't mean it!" Then common sense took over. "Well of course I meant it. I meant every word." Really, she must be getting old. The wind must have caused that door to slam, and there certainly wasn't anything suspicious about a little fresh air. Nevertheless, that prickly feeling persisted.

Sara broiled herself a little steak wrapped in bacon and warmed the rolls from last night, all the while fighting a feeling of panic. Was it her imagination, or were there noises coming from upstairs? She kept hearing footsteps, and once she thought she heard a door shut softly. Someone was up there! Grabbing a carving knife, Sara crept up the stairs and peered shakily into every room. All empty and undisturbed. "You silly old woman. What's the matter with you?" Nevertheless, she continually glanced over her shoulder—just to be sure.

"I need to get out and about. Maybe this solitude is too much for me. I'll do the grocery shopping." Halfway down the stairs she stopped dead in her tracks and gasped. She knew
without a doubt that she'd left every light on when she went upstairs, but now the entire ground floor was shrouded in darkness! What was more, there was another Reminder sitting on the kitchen table! "Who's there? You can come out now!" Silence. "Harry?" No reply, of course.

Once down the stairs, Sara rushed to turn on every light. Something was going on, and she didn't like it. As she glanced around the kitchen, the telephone caught her eye and she smiled tremulously. Of course. She could call her daughter. Sensible Jane would know what to do about all this. Sara's gnarled fingers fumbled awkwardly with the numbers, but Jane answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Jane, this is Mother. Are you busy?"

"Mother, what's wrong? You sound so shaky. Do you feel all right?"

"Yes, yes. I feel fine. But Jane! Something strange is going on. Someone is here with me. In the house, I mean!"

"What are you talking about? Who's there?"

"I don't know. I just know that someone is here."

"Now wait a minute. What's happening?"

"Well, I keep finding the Reminder all over the house. And I know I threw it away, Jane. Twice! But it still keeps popping up!"

"What? Mother, I . . . ."

"It's TRUE, Jane! Someone is watching me, too. I felt it all last night, and today, too. Especially after dinner last night. Why, I couldn't even finish my lobster. Lobster, Jane! It started to taste funny."

"Mother, do you feel all right? Maybe you had a touch of flu last night. A fever can make you think strange things."

"Jane, what are suggesting? I've never felt better. But I haven't told you everything. Just this noon, I heard noises upstairs, but when I went up to check, nothing was there! And when I came downstairs, the lights were out! And I know I left them on! All of them! I know I did!"

"Mother, calm down. I'm sure you must have turned them off when you went upstairs. Surely you must be in the habit by now."

"What habit?"
“Don’t you remember how Dad used to badger you about turning off the lights when you left a room? To save energy? He used to go around the house turning the lights off after you. I know! Maybe he’s haunting you!” Jane cackled.

“Jane! Don’t be ridiculous. Although, come to think of it, I did think I heard him sniff that nasty way when I was putting on my cold cream last night. I use an expensive brand now, Jane. One that he never would have approved of. As a matter of fact, I have been spending a lot of money lately. You don’t suppose . . .”

“Now, seriously. Do you want me to come and stay with you for a while? You aren’t so young anymore, and you certainly aren’t used to being your own boss yet.”

Sara suddenly felt very old and foolish. Of course, she must have turned the lights off before she went upstairs. She must have!

“No, Jane. that won’t be necessary. I’m perfectly able to take care of myself.”

“Now I’ve hurt your feelings. I’m sorry, Mom. I just worry about you being all alone in that house.”

“I know, I know. I really have to do my grocery shopping now, dear. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“You don’t bother me. Oh, and Mother?”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about spending money. You just enjoy yourself and buy the things you want. After all those years of penny-pinching, you deserve to treat yourself.”

“Oh, I have been, Jane. Good-bye.”

“Bye.”

The house seemed too quiet to Sara, and there was a feeling of something hovering in the air. The thing to do was get out and go to the store. She picked up her purse from the counter and reached inside automatically for the car keys. They weren’t there. But she always put them in that zipper compartment! Sara rummaged through the kitchen drawers and checked her other purse, but with no success. Her heart sank. There was only one other place that the keys might be, and she didn’t want to look. Harry’s study. Before his death, he had never allowed her to drive, saying that if she did, she would be making ten wasteful trips a day. Better that she run her errands when he, too, had business in town. Sara pushed
open the door to his study. Sure enough, the keys were where they had always been kept—on a little nail by his desk. It was too much! Sara darted to the desk, snatched the keys, and tore out of the house as fast as her stiff old legs would carry her, leaving on every single light in the house.

This couldn’t be all in her head.

After parking the car, she trudged through the tall glass doors of the supermarket, noticing by the sign on the window that hotdogs were on special this week. She winced.

She had almost filled her cart before she came to the cold meat section. For some reason, she seemed to be irresistibly drawn to those dratted hotdogs. Hmmm. Even though she did hate those weiners, 79¢ was no bad deal. Maybe if she bought just one package. Just in case . . . in case of what? She would never eat another hotdog if her life depended on it! It was almost as if Harry were standing there beside her, commanding her to put that package of dogs into her cart! Well, she’d show him a thing or two!

“No, Harry! I won’t buy the hotdogs, I won’t turn off the lights, and I WON’T stop eating lobster! And I can use any night cream that I want!”

For of course, it had been Harry all along.

The boy stacking cans in the aisle closest to Sara eyed her curiously. What was that white-haired old lady saying? Abashed, she stared intently at the list of ingredients on a package of head cheese, avoiding his eyes. What ever had made her speak up that way, right in front of everyone? After the boy had moved on to the next aisle, she trotted towards the check-out line, stopping only once along the way to pick up a bag of peanut clusters.

Luckily the line hadn’t been too long. Sara rushed to her car and edged out of the parking lot. Five minutes later, she was walking through the door of the nearest travel agency. Perhaps it was time to expand her horizons a bit. Maybe a short visit to cousin Mabel and her brood in Florida was just the tonic she needed.

“May I help you, ma’am?”

“Yes. I was wondering if I could maybe take some brochures home with me. I’m thinking of going South this winter.”

The blonde behind the desk supplied Sara with at least a
dozen pamphlets sporting palm trees and sandy beaches. Just what she wanted.

"Will you be checking back with us, ma'am?"

"No doubt I'll be back within the week. Thank you."

Sara noticed without surprise that, although she'd left them all ablaze, every light in her house was out when she pulled into the driveway. It was only to be expected, just as was the cold rush of air that hit her when she opened the front door. Sixty-two degrees—again.

"Well, I'm home now, and I'm going to turn on every single light in this entire house!"

She marched from room to room, noticing as she did that The Reminder was again on the table. She stopped in front of Harry's picture. He eyed her coldly.

"I know what you're trying to do, Harry. How can you be so selfish? I'm entitled to a few pleasures after all those years of scrimping and saving."

The lights flickered.

"Quit trying to scare me. I lived with you for forty-seven years, remember? It's just too bad that you were too wrapped up in your banking account all that time to ever loosen up and enjoy life."

The room grew even colder.

"Now stop it. You've been making me miserable, but I'm still willing to compromise. I'll even have macaroni and cheese once a week if it'll make you feel better. But not hotdogs. Never again!"

The kitchen lights went out and the back door slammed.

"I just knew that a compromise wouldn't satisfy you. But this is one argument that I won't lose. I went to the travel agency today, Harry. See the brochures? If this nonsense doesn't stop directly, I promise you that I'll take all your money and spend every last cent of it traveling. I mean it! Now, how do you like that?"

For a moment the room seemed to get colder, then suddenly it was warm again and the kitchen lights went on. As for The Reminder, it had simply vanished.

"Thank you, Harry. I knew you'd see it my way."

Sara sighed contentedly and strolled into the kitchen. Yes, a little glass of white wine would certainly taste good right now.