

These days are passing over me at the speed of light,
And standing here in their shadow I'm silenced at the sight,
Like water on the wind I sense the change to come,
All that I've held in like teardrops run.
I am clay and I am water falling forward in this order
While the world spins 'round so fast,
Slowly I'm becoming
Who I am
Nothing ever stays the same, the wheel will always turn,
I feel the fire in the change but somehow it doesn't burn,
Like a beggar blessed I stumble in the Grace,
Reaching out my hand for what awaits...'

Also by Susan McGeown:

Rosamund's Bower

A Garden Walled Around Trilogy:

Call Me Bear

Call Me Elle

Call Me Survivor

Rules for Survival

Recipe for Disaster

The Butler Did It

A
Well Behaved
Woman's
Life

By Susan Lee McGeown



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magentaswan@patmedia.net

Just in case you're wondering:

All characters in this book have no real existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names.

I will admit that some parts of this story are distantly inspired by some wise and wonderful individuals this author has had the privilege to know and love.

In addition, all incidents within this story are pure invention.**

**Well, at least you'll never get me to admit that they're true!

To all these Godly Women I have had the privilege to learn from:

Those Biblical Ones that have gone before me-

The Widow With Two Mites, Rahab, Leah,

The Wise Woman of Abel, and Deborah,

~ And ~

Those Present Day Ones that I am blessed to be able to call friends-

Maryhynn, Wendy, Laury, Patti, Maria, Judy,

Lisa, Melony, Jenn, Jen, Beth, Kim, and Kate

~ Truly ~

We know that in all things God works
for the good of those who love Him,
who have been called according to His purpose.²

Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord is the one who goes before you. ⁱⁱⁱ

The Widow's Might

The transformation was instantaneous it seemed. It was the final insult over the course of two years of hell. She stepped into the shower a woman and stepped out an old lady. Standing nude, dripping water all over the carpet she stared in stunned horror at a vision that would define the rest of her life: *she had a gray pubic hair*. She finally sat down on the edge of the tub, her body already feeling the effects of age. Her hip ached. Arthritis. Her neck and shoulders cramped. Scoliosis.

She desperately searched through the file of her mind looking for reassurance that she *wasn't* old, she wasn't nearing the end of her life. Words crashed around in her head that did nothing to soothe her: widow, grown children, Nice 'N Easy # 37... She glared at the shower in a fury of accusation; it was like an evil time machine. *Things would truly never be the same*. But what was she thinking? Things were *never* as they seemed. She already knew that. Life was just one big lie.

In those early moments as she shuffled around her bedroom she considered just going to bed, pulling the covers up and waiting for the inevitable – death. It could only be a few weeks away ... But she had obligations at church that morning. She may be old, but she was still responsible. *Until Alzheimer's took over ...*

Church attendance had been a part of more than half of the 52 years of her life. A legacy her mother had left in her that she had not been able to shake. *Can't teach an old dog new tricks*, her head said. She'd done her share of active involvement over the course of the years: Sunday school, youth group, and Vacation Bible School when the kids were little, attendance at adult Bible studies once the kids were older. She had friends there. When Jonathan died, the church family had rallied around her with a solid show of love and support that had helped her through those dark first days and weeks and months while she gradually adjusted to the new club of Widowhood.

At first the concern and outreach had been much appreciated. The phone calls, the notes, the meals, and the visits had kept her from drowning in the ocean of sorrow and loneliness and strangeness that in the blink of an eye had become her life. But she could not be shielded from the harsh realities of life – Widowhood *and* The Truth - forever. Eventually, she had to face the facts of what her life and her marriage

had been: a lie. That's when she began to withdraw. Recede from the real world into an imaginary, dulling fog of numbness. Inquiries of how she was feeling, how she was coping, how she was *making it now* were answered with vague, automatic responses that had no basis in fact or reality. They just kept everyone at bay so she could continue to try to cope. It was an act of survival. As she quietly, slowly began to withdraw from life, she became just a mere shadow of what she once was. No one knew The Truth but her. She kept it bottled up inside her partly because of pride and partly because she saw no reason to tell it. What good would it do to tell anyone that her great grief initially rooted in her husband's death was overshadowed with rage when she discovered that he had been unfaithful to her? She grieved not the death of her husband in the end, she grieved the loss of her entire adult life. All thirty plus years.

Driving to church she realized that The Shower Incident (as her mind now referred to it) was the first emotional jolt she'd felt in months. Hell, years. She was approaching the second full year of Widowhood and for the life of her this second year was nothing but a dull, gray blur. She had gotten quite good at not feeling, not reacting, not noticing anything really, all under the guise of being a functional, sane woman. She'd stopped going out almost entirely. She'd even found a local food store that delivered groceries to her once a week. The days went by one after another in a fog of blissful nothingness, growing into weeks and then months ... People who knew her well finally accepted that the woman she was now was the woman she was going to be. Flat. Unemotional. Withdrawn. Solitary. And now, she'd add a new one to the list. *Old*.

She was doing the scripture reading today at church. It was the only church duty that she was still performing after all her years of service. Not that she hadn't tried to get out of it. Requests to be left off the rotating list of volunteers had been met with various excuses. "Oh, I forgot you'd asked." "Please, we're short handed in that area, can't you do it for one more rotation?" "Really? You're still on the list? I thought we'd taken care of that ..." When she'd gotten the call this past week to remind her she was up this weekend she'd been rather forceful and abrupt. She'd been assured that she would be removed from the list this time. So, this was well and truly the last time.

The smiles of welcome (and pity) were acknowledged by her with polite yet distant responses. One tall, scholarly looking gentlemen hovered at the doorway to the sanctuary and as she brushed by him he asked if he could speak with her briefly after the service? He needed to ask her something but didn't want to make her late ... She mumbled an answer that could have been interpreted any way he saw fit and hurried to find a seat. Good grief, he probably wanted her to sit on another committee or volunteer for some "just" cause. Old widow women did those sort of things.

The scripture passage was read without her brain comprehending the words that came out of her mouth. The hymns were sung without her appreciating the verses. Her mind wandered as the announcements were being given. Still, church was the only place that she still could not always escape into numbness. The lies and the deceit somehow seemed bigger, worse. How could Jonathan have sat in a House of God and pretended to be the devoted husband when he was doing what he was doing? Flashes of memories poked through the gray cloud to cause a pain so intense that she almost doubled over with it. It was in this place that the memories of Jonathan and even the children as they grew stole into her carefully guarded emotions and brought her agony to life. Lies, all of it lies. In a blinding flash of the obvious she

determined then and there that this would probably be her last time to attend church. With the acknowledgement of old age would come a final change in behavior. She'd become a heathen as well.

A word jarred her out of her thoughts. She could have sworn that she had heard the minister say, "Widow." She looked up at him, standing high in his podium, his robes perfectly arranged, his hair carefully combed, his glasses slightly askew. He was a sincere sort. She couldn't find fault with him really. He was new, only here a little over three years. Young, too, with a sweet, energetic wife and three children that were pure hellions on earth. She couldn't even remember his name. Talk about numbness. Curiosity made her pick up the bulletin and had it not been so utterly inappropriate she would have laughed out loud. His sermon topic was "The Widow's Mite or The Widow's *Might*." She remembered that the minister always tried to come up with catchy titles for his sermons to drag the unsuspecting in.

She remembered this story. The old woman gives just two pennies – or mites – and yet Jesus makes a big fuss because it wasn't the amount she gave that was important but more importantly that she'd given *everything she had and had trusted that God would care for her*. She reflected just briefly that perhaps her situation was moderately better than this poor Biblical widow ...

Financially, she was well off. Hell, thanks to Jonathan's death she was close to being a millionaire. Life insurance policies taken out when the children were small and the mortgage was big to cover the unthinkable had succeeded in providing for her in comfort for the rest of her days. At a time in her life when the children were finished with school, the mortgage was paid off, and the necessities of survival cost her minimally she had more money than she knew how to deal with.

"The measure of the gift was not how much was given, but how much there was to give," the young minister intoned. She had a brief, unchristianlike thought that perhaps it was his way of saying the giving was down and they needed a few more dollars in the plate. When was the last time she'd written a check to the church? She had no idea. She used to give so faithfully. Most of her bills were automated now with direct withdrawal out of her checking account. Another area she no longer had to deal with or think about. She fumbled through her purse and wrote a magnanimous check and tossed it into the plate as it passed her by.

She left before the final hymn was finished being sung. She was half way home before she realized she'd escaped speaking with that gentleman who'd wanted to ask her a question. Good. Her conscience was technically clear because she hadn't *intentionally* avoided him. He'd have to find another willing widow to volunteer some of her vapid, empty expanse of a life. What bitter thoughts she had. Old. Withdrawn. Widow. Heathen. Flat. Unemotional. Solitary. And now bitter. Wow, she was coming up with quite a list.

She didn't go home. She drove aimlessly. It was a new way to pass the time of numbness. She briefly considered stopping in with one of the kids but she couldn't deal with their sorrow any more than she could deal with her own. To hear them speak fondly, with love and longing for a man that had been nothing but a false illusion made her throat ache from the want of screaming the truth. After two years, Jonathan's presence was still everywhere. Even in this car she drove she realized. She was stopped at a light at a huge intersection, lost in thought. The minister's words rolled around in her head. *The Widow's Mite. The Widow's Might*. Across the intersection colorful flags snapped in the breeze, helium balloons danced on the ends of their strings, and someone dressed as a little old lady (cane, gray haired wig, spectacles, and big orthopedic shoes) danced a jig on the corner. She blinked her eyes twice, disbelieving what her brain acknowledged and

processed. The sign, with bright red letters at least four feet high proclaimed, "Escape the Old! Buy A New Car Today!"

She'd use her widow's might spending her widow's mite. She'd buy herself a new sports car.

She'd bought a new car once, in her early twenties. *Almost thirty years ago*, her mind told her glibly. She'd been terrified back then of negotiating and getting taken advantage of. She'd read up on all of the information about the car of her choice, written her best offer down on a piece of paper so she wouldn't have to negotiate and had been pleased at the results. Standing in the air-conditioned showroom looking at all the shiny cars she was overwhelmed at how young all the salesmen looked. They all seemed younger than her youngest son! Any nerves she had about dealing with them evaporated. She knew how to handle over-confident children. She'd lived with three of them.

She wandered over to the stacks of brochures. Colorful and inviting. Promising laughter, love, fun, blue skies, and any other positive hopes and dreams you could imagine.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" a voice said behind her.

He was *no more* than twenty-two she decided. Dark hair, blue eyes, reeking of cologne, and oozing false sincerity. *Piece of cake*, she thought. *This might even be fun*.

"Yes," she heard herself say. "I want a car. Small, sporty, bright color, zippy engine. If you play your cards right and offer me an excellent deal I'll pay you *cash* right this moment. Talk fast but don't give me any crap. I'm not in the mood." Then she smiled at him. *The Widow's Might*, her head thought.

An hour later she drove out of the dealership in a shiny red convertible with a five speed manual transmission and an engine that tended to sound like a large cat purring. By the time she was home she was in the depths of despair again, however. Pulling into the garage, parking the new car next to Jonathan's, she was overwhelmed with her folly. She was now an Old Woman with a sports car attempting to recapture her youth. And everyone knew that her youth was gone. As well as her future.

The pastor called her on Monday morning. She was still in bed lost in the numbing grayness of her life. "Mrs. Lawson?"

"Yes," she said, straining to make her voice not sound like it was the first time it had been used that morning.

"It's Pastor Duncan. I was calling to see if everything was all right with you."

Oh, right. That was his name. Another conciliatory call. She sighed and said in a somewhat exasperated voice, "Yes, I'm fine, Pastor. Why would you think otherwise?"

He hesitated, sensitive to her tone and perhaps fearful of her emotional state. Who knew? "Well, you seemed so preoccupied yesterday and left before the service was over. I just wanted to let you know that if you ever need to talk ..."

"How old are you, Pastor Duncan?" she asked him abruptly.

He seemed surprised by her question. "I'm thirty-four."

"How much experience do you have with fifty-two year old widows, Pastor?"

She could almost hear him smile. "Well, believe it or not, more than you'd expect. My mother's a fifty-five year old one and my father's been dead for ten years. And my mother-in-law is a forty nine year old one. She's been widowed for the past three years. In addition, at church -"

She cut him off. “Okay, you’ve made your point. Since you’re so vastly experienced, why don’t you tell me what you think I’d like to talk with you about?” If she was determined to become this heathen thing so late in life, she’d better nip this caring, God fearing man out of her life but quick.

“Oh, I don’t know. Life. Your Future. Opportunities. Anything you’d like.” She had a momentary but brilliant flash of her dripping wet, gray pubic hair. *Opportunities? Future?*

“I’ve got my life and any future I’ve still got left all arranged nicely, thank you. No concern there. As for opportunities, I think I’m just going to sit back and float along and see what life drifts by my way. But I’ve got your number and I appreciate your concern. I’ll call if I need any advice. Thank - you. Good - bye.” With that, she hung up.

The phone rang again, almost immediately. She looked at it like it really had a nerve, hesitated, and then picked it up. “Hello?” she said in an annoyed, how-dare-you-call-me-back voice.

“Mother?” It was her daughter, Grace.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“Who were you expecting?!”

“No one. What’s up, dear?”

“I was wondering if you’d like to come to lunch today. I’ve got prep before lunch so we could actually have more than my usual forty minutes.” Grace was a 3rd grade teacher three towns over. She remembered when she had been a teacher at one time, though briefly. A quite good one, too. The kid’s had liked her. The parents had liked her. The administration hadn’t been too thrilled with her all the time, though. What had Jonathan called her? Oh yes, a maverick. She’d loved flouting the rules, being successful, and then having them let her get away with it in the end because of her successes. That was a million years ago.

“Mother? Are you there? Can you come to lunch?”

“Well,” she started to come up with an excuse like she was really busy but didn’t have the energy. It was easier to just say yes. “Well, okay.”

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic,” she heard her daughter say.

“I’m sorry, I’m just tired. I haven’t been sleeping well,” she lied.

“You should make an appointment and have a complete check-up,” Grace said. “When was the last time you did that?”

God knows, she thought. She really couldn’t even remember the last time she cut her toenails. She threw back the covers and looked at her neglected feet. Yuck. “I don’t know,” she heard herself say. “What time do you want me to come by?”

“My prep starts at 11:30. We could go to the little deli down the street if you’d like.”

“That sounds fine. I’ll see you at 11:30.” The call ended and she continued to lay in bed for another minute or two. The bedside clock said 10:15. She padded into the bathroom and ran the shower. On impulse, as she was toweling herself dry, she rummaged through a drawer, found a pair of tweezers and ripped the offending pubic hair out. It hurt like hell. She searched for others but there were none. She wondered if at some point she would use Nice ‘N Easy #37 in places other than her hair. No way, she decided.

She was never one for make - up or high fashion. Shower, comb, dress, moisturize, a bit of blush and a quick flick of the mascara. She was ready to go in thirty minutes. Standing, looking at herself in the reflection of the bathroom mirror, she felt like she was looking at a solemn stranger. Who was this woman, she thought with all sincerity. Where had she come from? Where had she been? Where was she going? What was she doing? She didn't have an answer for any one of those questions. It was almost as if with Jonathan's death and the discovery of his duplicity, her life had disappeared. There were no memories to sustain her because none of them had been true. She was just a void. She had a flash of an idea and rummaged through the linen closet and found a basket. It was filled with nail polishes of every color. She and Grace used to paint their toenails different colors in the summer. She selected a pale pink and gave it a good shake. It was hard as a rock. So was the purple, the black, the green, the orange, the yellow, the clear with blue sparkle glitter. Thunk, thunk, thunk. In they each went into the garbage can, one after another. Finally, in disgust, she threw the whole basket in. As she went to shut the closet door, sitting on the shelf pushed to the far back was a bottle of red polish. As she reached for it to throw it in the garbage she heard the distinctive click of the small metal beads that they put in the bottle to aid in mixing. This one wasn't dried up. She spent five minutes painting her toes. Another five letting them dry. Then she left.

She stood in the garage for the longest time staring in horror at the sports car. *What had possessed her?* She had no desire to drive it. None. And yet driving Jonathan's car was out of the question. She had not set foot in it in over two years. She was not even sure how it got back to the house from the train station where Jonathan had left it. It was covered with a fine film of dust. It probably wouldn't even start.

She sighed. What would Grace say when she saw the sports car? Hopefully, she could park it and get into the school before she noticed. They could drive in Grace's car to the deli.

She'd misjudged the traffic and arrived late. Grace was standing outside of the school with her purse watching the road impatiently. She pulled up in front of her and Grace never even glanced at her. "Grace."

It could have been funny, but it wasn't. Slowly, Grace bent down to look into the passenger window. "Mother?!"

She sighed. "Hop in," she said in a voice she forced to sound bright and airy.

Grace opened the door and folded herself into the passenger seat. "Congratulations," she said to her daughter, "you're my first passenger! Which way to the deli?" Grace, at a loss for words, pointed to the right. Off they roared.

"When did you decide to get a new car?" Grace managed to ask once she found her voice.

"Exactly 61 minutes before I bought this," she volunteered. At the stop sign, she looked at her daughter for direction. Grace was staring at her with a look of stunned incredulity. She arched her eyebrow at her. "Which way?"

She ordered tuna salad and Grace had a turkey club. They both drank water. She caught Grace looking down at her toenails at one point and instinctively tried to curl them under to hide them. It didn't work.

"How are you, Mother?" Grace asked between bites.

"Fine," she lied. She lied a lot lately she realized.

"No really ..." Grace persisted.

"Why does everyone keep asking me this?" she countered impatiently.

“Who’s everyone?”

“Oh, the pastor called this morning just before you did.”

“Ohhh,” Grace said in a knowing sort of way.

For some reason that irritated her. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“I didn’t understand why you were so ornery when I called this morning. Now I get it, that’s all,” Grace said with a shrug.

“How are Neil and the kids?” she asked solicitously in an attempt to swing the subject away from her and how she felt.

“Fine. Neil said we need to get wills written. I don’t know what the big rush is. The baby cut a new tooth. Zoe’s driving the sitter nuts. She crayoned all over the dining room wall *again*. How is it they know where to find stuff you think you’ve hidden?”

“Neil’s right. You need wills. Especially now that you’ve got the two kids. Buy Zoe a bucket of chalk. Let her color all over the walls outside. The rain will wash it away.”

Grace looked at her for a minute. “That’s a good idea. You always seem so capable to me, Mother. You seem to just take a moment, think, process, and react. I’ve always wished I had that ability ...” Grace smiled at her. “I’ve got some colored chalk in the classroom.”

She was startled by the perception her daughter seemed to have of her. She found herself frowning to herself struggling to find concrete examples of the woman her daughter had just described. She mentally shook her head. If she *had* existed (and that was doubtful) then she most certainly was gone now.

Grace cleared her throat and looked uncomfortable for a moment. *Oh*, she thought. *There was an ulterior motive to this luncheon date.*

“How are you *really* doing, Mom? We’re worried about you.”

“Who’s ‘we?’” she asked to stall for time.

“The boys and I,” Grace said in a hurt, you-should-know-that tone. “What are you doing with yourself? How are you filling your days? What are you doing for fun and excitement?”

“I’m having a wonderful time, living life to the fullest,” she said a little too brightly.

“Such as?”

“Driving around in my new sports car and painting my toes and the town red.”

“Mother ...”

“What?”

“John, Todd, and I think you should go get some counseling. Some sort of grief therapy or something. You’re slowly shutting yourself off from everyone and everything and we’re worried about you.”

“I don’t need to see a therapist,” she said in a firm voice. “I’m old, decrepit, lonely, marginally bitter, and unemotional. I am even considering becoming a heathen. But I am certainly *not* crazy and in need of therapy.”

Grace looked at her with a stunned, open-mouth kind of expression. “*Heathen?*” she finally managed to say. “Did you say *heathen?*”

“Yes, I’m considering no longer attending church,” she said. “I’m tired of all the pitying glances and the solicitous inquiries into my well being. So, I’ve decided to give up church for a while. It’s a *widow’s right*,” she finished with a brief smile at her play on words.

“A widow’s right? What does that have to do with anything? Mother, you are not making any sense. If you think you’re putting me at ease, you’re not!” She looked at her watch and took another bite of her sandwich. “And you’re *not* old. God! You’re only fifty-two! Why would you think such a thing?”

She looked at her daughter and sighed and then looked down at her sandwich. How could she explain things to her? The hands holding her sandwich looked old to her now even. They had wrinkles and – oh *no* – there were even a few age spots. *Tweezers aren’t going to take care of them*, the voice in her head said with great finality. Gazing back into her daughter’s eyes, she saw real concern. “What would you have me do, Grace? I’m doing the best I can. I’m adjusting to the death of Jonathan, as I know all of you are.” She paused, working on the mixture of emotions that worked up and clutched at her throat. *I’m adjusting to the discovery that I’ve never had a life even though I’m over fifty*. “I find myself ... rather aimless. I just can’t seem to find a passion for anything anymore. I’m just kind of floating.”

“Mother, I’m asking you this in all seriousness. You’re not thinking of doing yourself any *harm* or anything are you? I know the process of grief is different for everyone and some people take longer to go through it than others, but, well ...”

She snorted then. A great, loud, unladylike snort. She saw a construction worker at one of the other tables turn and look in their direction. She ignored him. “Grace, look at me. If I was thinking of *harming* myself, I would have done it already. It would have been much easier than dealing with all this pain and adjustment. But I’ve seriously not even considered it. I’m lost. I’m unhappy. But I’m not suicidal.”

Grace looked at her for long moments weighing the truth of her words and then looked at her watch again. “I’ve got to get back,” and began to crumple up her sandwich papers and gather together her other garbage. She followed her daughter’s lead and stood ready to go.

In the car, on the way back, Grace said suddenly, “Wait until Todd sees this car, Mom. He’ll go nuts.” She hadn’t thought of that. It made her smile a little bit.

As Grace got out of the car, she leaned over and said, “Oh yeah, I forgot. Zoe’s choir is singing this Sunday at our church. Would you come and see?”

So much for becoming a beathen, she thought. “Yes, of course I will,” she said.

“Good, the service is at 11:00. We’ll save you a seat.” She blew a kiss, gave a brief wave and rushed back into the school. The red car engine purred waiting for direction.

Over the next few days the car attracted far more attention than she wanted or anticipated. It was rapidly becoming another of the great mistakes of her life. In an effort to gain some privacy she searched around the house and uncovered a battered old baseball cap that had belonged to John or Todd. She added dark sunglasses to the look. Now when she went out, whether the top was up or down she hoped sincerely that no one would recognize her. On Wednesday, she stopped at a traffic light. While waiting for the green she turned and looked to her right. A young man, seated in his own sports car, looked directly at her, smiled, nodded, *and winked at her*, then roared off. At first, she looked to her left to see who he’d been looking at. There was no one there. She was so completely stunned by the realization that *he had meant her* that she sat there for a full course of the light changing. It was only an impatient horn sounding that made her finally move on.

Todd was waiting for her in the driveway when she came home, leaning against his car, arms crossed. He was the spitting image of his father. Only he was twenty-three and to the best of her knowledge he wasn’t

a cheating bastard. John had been named after his father but Todd had gotten the likeness. Tall, thin, sandy hair, brown eyes, easy smile. *Her baby*. She could barely stand the sight of him. Not only did he look like his father, he had all the same mannerisms, too. Down to the slow lazy smile and the way he cocked his head to the right when he was listening to you talk to him. She couldn't look at him without thinking of Jonathan. And thoughts of Jonathan made her spiral down into the agony of suppressed emotions. To express the fury and hate and sorrow she had inside her would make her insane ...

"Hey, Mom," Todd said as she pulled into the driveway. He squatted down by the driver's side and smiled at her. "Grace said I had to come over and see what you bought. Said I'd go nuts when I saw it. You bought a *Porsche*?"

"Is that what it is?" she responded. "I bought it because it was red and had a zippy look to it."

He shook his head at her ineptness. "Can I drive it?"

"I suppose so."

"Scoot over. I'll take you for an ice cream."

She got out because it was impossible to "scoot over" in the car's small interior. He watched her walk around the car and then grinned at her. "Nice hat."

She'd forgotten she was wearing it. "I found it in the basement. When the top's down my hair blows all over. Was it yours?"

He grinned at her again. "No, it was John's. He never wore it though ..."

"Why?"

"You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"Mom, it says *Hooters* across the front. That's a tittie bar. Someone gave it to John as a joke."

She snatched the hat off her head, horrified that she'd been driving around wearing it out in public. She looked at him and mumbled, "I thought it was a baseball team ..." That made him laugh out loud.

They went for ice cream a little ways up the local highway. They stood outside in the sunshine, leaning against the car, licking their cones and watching the world whiz by. "How are you doing, Mom?"

She sighed. "I know, I know, you're all worried about me. Afraid I'm going to do myself in or something. I'm *fine*."

"I'm not worried about you."

"You're not?" she asked, turning to look at him in surprise. That was a first.

"Nope. You've always been tough and sure of yourself. You've always done things just the way it suited you whether it was the way things normally were done or not. I figure you're going to grieve in your own unique way and everyone should just leave you the hell alone." He shrugged his shoulders and bit off the bottom of the cone to suck out the ice cream. He looked at her with the face of his father and smiled at her with that familiar grin. "Why change now?"

"Can I ask you a favor?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Would you get rid of Jonathan's car for me? I don't want it in the garage anymore."

"You want me to sell it?"

"I don't care if you drive it off a cliff. I just don't want it anymore."

He studied her for a minute and then slowly nodded his head. “I have a friend that’s looking for a car. I’ll ask him if he wants to buy it.”

“Fine.”

Twenty minutes later she was standing in her driveway waving goodbye to him as he backed his car out. At the base of the driveway, he turned into the street and then rolled his window down and shouted something to her.

“What?” she yelled back. “I didn’t hear you!”

“*I said,*” he shouted at her, “*nice toenails, Ma!*” Then he roared off down the street away from her.

She thought a lot about what he’d said to her that night. The numbness didn’t settle in right away. She made herself an omelet and let the voice in her head keep repeating the words Todd had said to her. They were kind words. *You’ve always been tough and sure of yourself. You’ve always done things just the way it suited you whether it was the way things normally were done or not.* She had a flash of her and the three kids eating chocolate cookies and grapes for dinner by candlelight because the power had failed. The three kids were terrified of the thunderstorm and the darkness and so she’d served them the ridiculous dinner to make them relax a bit. She smiled remembering one of the early baseball games she’d gone to for John and in her great pride she’d screamed, “*I gave birth to him!*” when he’d hit a home run. Both the boys had had a long talk with her that night discussing exactly what she could say and what she couldn’t say. She’d driven a hard bargain. They never were able to get her to stop yelling, “*That’s my son!!!*”

She liked the opinion Todd had of her. For a brief flash it warmed her and made her feel strong again. *The Widow’s Might* she thought. From now on, when Todd reminded her too much of Jonathan and the sight of him made her want to go insane, she’d close her eyes and remember him shouting, “Nice toenails, Ma!” Jonathan always hated it when she painted her toenails.

¹ From the song by Margaret Becker, from the album *Just Come In*, “Clay and Water”, 1998

² Romans 8:28, New International Version

ⁱⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 31:8, American Standard Translation