

“Little White Mercies” by BeBe Lefkoff

Maureen McConnell was awake but had not opened her eyes. *Maybe, she thought, Maybe everything will be normal again. Maybe I will open my eyes and see my white bedroom curtains dancing in the warm morning breeze.*

When Maureen finally let her lashes flutter open, all she saw was cheap commercial-grade pleated drapes in muted shades of green and yellow. The window could not even be opened. Maureen knew this was not her home. This was not her bed. Those were not her puke colored curtains. As she cast about trying to orient herself, she spotted a delicate gold watch rested in a porcelain dish.

*That is my watch.* She draped the watch across her thin pale wrist but could not manage to operate the clasp.

“Can I help you?” A male voice asked from across the room.

Maureen sat up abruptly. “Who are you? Why are you in my room? Where am I?”

A heavy black woman wearing blue scrubs shuffled to her side.

“Now, now. Mrs. Mac, don’t you go gettin’ yourself all worked up,” she soothed. “You are in the Memory Care Center and this nice man is Roger.” As an afterthought she added, “he’s your husband.”

“No. I don’t think—“ Maureen paused. She really couldn’t argue the point because the truth was, she didn’t know. She occasionally saw glimpses of a life before the hospital but she didn’t know what was real. She glanced at Roger who stood patiently waiting to help her with her wristwatch. She was absolutely certain that she had never seen him before, but when he smiled her heart did a funny little dance. It was not recognition exactly; but she felt—safe. Slowly, she extended her arm and allowed him to fasten the watch. Self consciously she reached up to smooth her hair. “Oh dear, Mr.—uhm, Roger, I do not appear to be dressed to receive company.”

“You look as beautiful as the day I met you.” Maureen flinched and pulled at the quilt that had slipped to her waist.

“Slow, Mr Mac. You gotta go slow,” the woman in the blue scrubs muttered *soto voce*.

For some reason this intercession annoyed Maureen and she shot the nurse a cross look. “if you would not mind stepping into the hall and giving me a moment to get dressed.”

A tiny flicker of something crossed his face but he cleared it with a big smile and excused himself. “I think I will go find us some coffee.”

“Two creamers—“ she began.

“—And four sugars,” he concluded.

Maureen opened her mouth, but he was gone before she could organize a response. She turned to the nurse. “Is he really my husband?”

“Oh honey, he sure is, an’ he’s a good one too. Been here every single day for two years straight.”

Maureen felt a lump in her throat. *Two years? I’ve been here two years?* She was sure this had to be wrong. Aloud she insisted, “But it was just yesterday that I—?” She stopped because she really couldn’t remember anything she had done just yesterday or the day before, or the day before that. When she looked inside her mind, all she could see was a gray mist. Vague shapes formed and dissolved before she could recognize them.

Maureen was dressed in a light blue twin set and white slacks when Roger returned with a large coffee in each hand. The nurse was just starting to brush out her silver blonde hair as Roger leaned in the doorway. “Knock knock, can I come in?”

Maureen took the brush from the nurse’s hand and imperiously announced, “That will be all for now.”

The nurse grinned. “Well, yes ma’am. Y’all just ring the bell if her ladyship requires assistance.”

When the nurse left the room, Maureen sighed. “Oh dear, I believe I may have been rude to that young woman.” After a moment she added, “It’s so hard to—I don’t know if—“

Roger waited patiently. The doctors had said that it was very important to be patient. He reached for the hairbrush the nurse had discarded. “May I?” He stepped behind her and began to brush her hair in long practiced strokes.

“How are you feeling today?”

Maureen relaxed into the soothing rhythm of the hairbrush. “I feel—out of step; like I am playing a game and everyone knows the rules except me. I try to remember. But it’s like my head is full of these unlabeled cardboard boxes. I can walk around the boxes. I can pick them up and shake them like Christmas presents, but they are all sealed tightly with packing tape.”

After a moment Maureen sighed. “Why am I here? Can you tell me what happened?”

“You were in an accident. The airbag deployed, but you still hit your head pretty hard.” He didn’t want to say more. He hoped that for once, she wouldn’t ask—but she did.

“Was anyone else hurt?”

Roger swallowed hard and concentrated on keeping his hairbrush strokes long and rhythmic. “The drunk driver that hit you was killed instantly. He wasn’t wearing a seatbelt.”

“Oh.” Maureen was still. When she changed topics, he let out the breath he had been holding. “How did we meet?”

He smiled. “Let’s go for a stroll in the gardens and I will tell you all about it.” After the accident, when the doctors had forced him to accept the reality that she might never regain her memories, he had chosen this particular hospital because he knew she would love the rose gardens. She had never really had a green thumb but she loved to draw flowers.

“We met at a dance,” he began. “I had been strong-armed by a buddy to escort his sister, but she promptly abandoned me for her girlfriends.”

Maureen smiled sympathetically. “Oh, you poor thing.”

“Don’t feel too sorry for me. I eventually wandered into the gardens and found the most beautiful young lady sitting in the grass with a sketch pad.” Roger watched Maureen’s hand twitch as if she was drawing again.

“I fell head over heels in love the moment you looked up at me. Of course, I spent the next two years trying to convince you to love me back. You led me on quite a chase.”

Maureen stopped at a marble bench under the fringed umbrella of a lilac tree. “Surely not.”

“Oh yes ma’am, you did,” he retorted, “but I eventually wore you down.”

Maureen picked up a fallen flower and studied it pensively, “Did we have a good life?”

Roger was struck by the simple honesty of her question. “Oh my sweet Mo, we did. We had the most wonderful, amazing life.” He turned to hide the tears that shimmered in his eyes.

“Did we—do we—have children?” She braced herself for the answer.

Roger didn’t even blink as he lied to her. “No.” He didn’t think reminding her of the two miscarriages was necessary. If her mind had erased that pain, then all the better. Lying about Jacob was harder. The first year she was in the hospital, he had told her everything.. He had torn his own mental scabs off each day as he told her that they had given up trying to have a baby until their sweet Jacob came along. He told her how clever and handsome and talented he was. He told her about the old guitar that Jacob had taught himself to play and how he had unbuckled his seatbelt to reach for his guitar just as the drunk driver crossed into her lane.

The doctors had assured him to tell the truth, however painful, would help her heal. But after a year of breaking her heart every—single—day, he decided that he just couldn’t do it anymore. He decided that if God had given her the mercy of forgetting, who was he to say differently?

“No kids?”

“Nope, no kids.” He attempted a casual shrug, but he couldn’t quite meet her eyes.

Somewhere along the path, he reached down and took her hand. She started to pull back but her hand seemed to fit into his perfectly and so she let him keep it.

After a nice walk through the roses, Roger confessed that he, regretfully, had to go.

“Will you come again?”

“I will always come for you,” he replied with sweet sincerity.

For a moment the veil lifted and she felt tears well up in her eyes. She reached up to stroke his jaw. “My sweet Roger Dodger!”

Uncertain, he asked, “Mo?”

She barely had time to nod before he pulled her in and kissed away all of the mutual pain. For a magical moment they were one heart again.

By the time he settled her in her hospital armchair, he was a stranger. “Thank you for the lovely walk—“

“Roger.”

“So nice to meet you and thank you for the lovely walk, Roger.”