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Check Mates

by Judith Zielinski Marshall

Sharing a checking account is more intimate than sharing a bed. We did both for 29 years. The marriage was like all unions—exasperating, tumultuous, tender, erotic, depressing, joyous, and then, suddenly over. He died. Some things were easier than others. He was, after all, 24 years older than me and in failing health for years. As if that really matters.

Hospital caregivers and the funeral directors were magnificent. Friends overwhelmed me with kindness. The phone rang incessantly, the mail brought expressions of sympathy, and people came with food, cakes, and sweet remembrances. A simple wake took place in our home town and then a funeral in his New Hampshire home town. The autumn weather was spectacular, the foliage cheerfully mocking any sadness. He was laid to rest next to his beloved mother in the family plot we had visited together for decades and bedecked with wreaths and flowers. Our golden retrievers romped in the fields next to the cemetery, about a mile from where my Yankee boy was raised, the old homestead now occupied by a young professor's family who loved the history of the place. The sort of place that reminds one of *Our Town* or *Spoon River Anthology* or the music of Aaron Copeland.

As all bereaved know, when the rituals have ended and the phone stops ringing, then begins the endless business paperwork. Death certificates were purchased by the dozen and even more photocopied. Surprising finds were encountered, love letters hidden for 60 years, a wedding ring from a former marriage, a dog tag from our first golden retriever, his fraternity pins and Waltham watches and pictures from his Army days in Panama, 1940-1945, things I had never seen.

I did my crying and moaning in the shower, feeling very noble and Eleanor Rooseveltian, loving him and hating him and cursing him and missing him. Some angel or fairy or demon takes over and we remember only the good things. He was an expert cook and baker and went to bartending school in his 70s. He was a beloved professor. He was a gifted carpenter, an excellent fisherman. He loved the Red Sox. He retired when we were married and began his new careers. He slept on the kitchen floor with each new puppy. We sobbed and held each other with the loss of each of our four goldens. He packed my lunches for work, packed my suitcases for travel, rubbed my feet, and brushed my hair. He could fix anything, he could untangle anything, and he never threw anything away. He loved corny jokes and *Jeopardy* on television. He loved his son and daughter and his grandchildren. He could iron and sew buttons and hems. He was my mother's girlfriend—the two of them shopping, cooking, and chattering in the kitchen. She died a few months before he did.

Each year I would go abroad and he took me to the airport and picked me up a week or weeks later. We both had a wonderful time in our separations. The craft fairs we did, the bed and breakfast inn we owned in Vermont, the concerts by the lake, the square dancing and round dancing we did. Like my father, he never used foul language. There any resemblance to my father ended.

He loved Halloween and his favorite costume was a ballerina complete with tutu and toe shoes, which he wore when he was 85. He was the last to leave the hall, still dancing while I waited, exhausted, in the car. So the WASP from New Hampshire, himself hewn from granite rock, and the Polish girl from Cleveland, despite all differences, stayed together (as we often said) for the sake of the dogs.

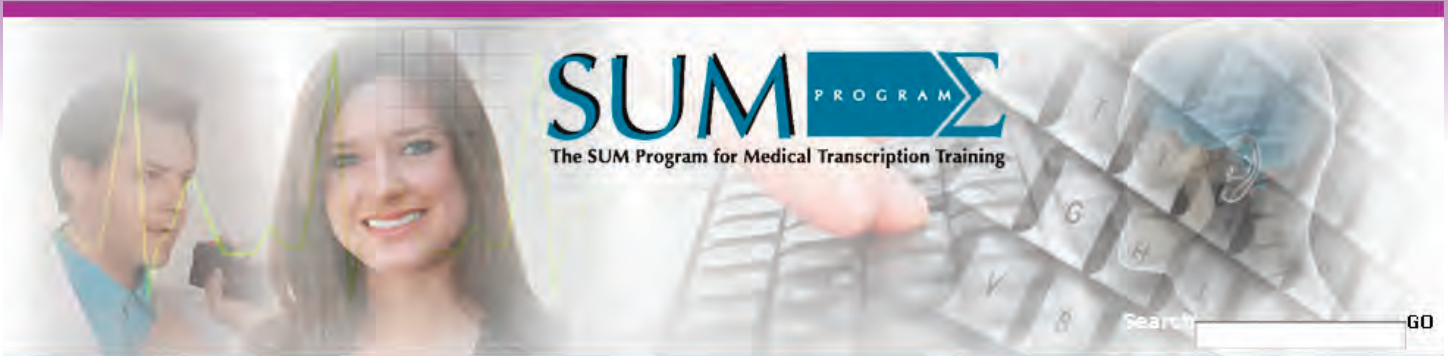
There was one thing I kept postponing. I did not want to go to the bank and take his name off of the account. I liked being the Mrs. in that Dr. and Mrs. It made me feel special and important. He was always very unassuming and modest, rarely used any titles. I was the pompous snob. During my blackest grief, solace appeared from a very unexpected source. I was struggling with changing the names on the check online with Big Bank and I called the help line. A young man on the telephone guided me to the correct page. "There you are," he said, "Just hit the delete button and your husband's name will disappear." As I saw Stuart's name disappear, letter by letter, a cry escaped my lips. "Oh," I said, "how hard it is to not see his name next to mine. He really is gone." And I began to cry.

Then the anonymous young man from the great big bank began to speak to me with great compassion and sensitivity, like an angel or minister or brother. What he said was beautiful and natural and as unexpected as a rainbow. He said he envied me. That I must have many happy memories and that of the billions of people on the earth, many never have the experience of a partner for so many years and the joy that was surely mine in thinking of him and our life together. At that moment, I accepted my husband's death and began to heal.

Judith Zielinski Marshall, Wakefield, MA., has been in the medical transcription field for over 30 years as an educator, business owner, and medical transcriptionist. She is the author of two books of humor and satire, *Medicate Me* (1987) and *Medicate Me Again* (1994), and scores of essays and articles published in *Perspectives* magazine over more than 20 years.



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