

The Phone Call
Karen Trask
2008

Louise?.... Hi, it's Joyce.

Oh, I'm fine, fine...just came from the Jackson's

No, she's off to Florida, asked me to look in on things for her from time to time.

Yeah - very sad...married nearly fifty years.

Yes, very sad, but, it was a lovely turn out and so many flowers too.

No, you're right about that, the place won't be the same without Joe. Didn't think she'd leave that quick though.

What did you say?

Oh, yeah no, it's only been a month since the funeral and she's been gone over a week already -never imagined her leaving. That's all.

Her? Well at first she seemed to take it all in stride, or so I thought, although Jess said she looked like she was going to jump down in there with him when they were lowering the casket.

Oh my, that would be a sight. No, nothing seemed too out of place to me until I started checking in more after the funeral and after today, I don't quite know what to think.

Well she's been cooking up some strange things, and putting them in with the rest of her preserves in the pantry downstairs.

What's that?

Well, she's never been one to sit down much. I always thought she would be the death of him. I'm sure she got him out of bed so she could wash the sheets. Everyday, even in winter, she'd have clothes out drying on the line before breakfast.

No, you're right there, no family, I'm sure that didn't help. She told me she had a friend in Florida, been asking her for years to come down. I didn't think she'd ever go. So...

What's that?

Oh yeah, well, I went over there this morning to check in on things and when I went into the basement, I had a peek in her pantry. She used to show it to me now and then. She was always so proud of her preserves. And, I just wanted to see what she'd made this year.

No, I told her long ago that she should get a freezer, but she wouldn't hear anything of it. Joe always said that she had the patience of Job when it came to filling her cupboard. She always had a jar of something on the table.

What was that?

Oh yeah, well I should have known that something was up right away. She was talking about sandwiches at the reception. She said their life together had been one big sandwich and that the meat of it was all gone, or something like that. I was got worried- hadn't seen any sign of life round the house since the funeral, so I went to check things out.

No answer at the door. It wasn't locked. I just went in. I called, but she didn't answer. She was in the kitchen, standing there in front of the table.

No, didn't see me, she never even looked up. Seemed as if she'd been making jelly when Joe died, everything just stayed put. The place was a mess.

Yeah, for her that's unusual. Not disorder there. Ever.

What was she doing? Just staring.

She was standing there staring into some space between the saucepan and a table full of empty jars. There were bouquets of roses from the funeral home on the table and petals had fallen into everything.

No, she never took any notice of me and I was afraid of scaring her. I just waited, watching her try to pull the petals out of the jelly, but the more she tried, the more the table shook and finally, the last of those roses just spilled right out onto her hands. There were bits of yellow and red everywhere. She just stood there, stunned kind of, holding them in her hands and then she started moving them between her fingers real slow-like and I remember that kitchen filling up with the smell of roses and oh Louise, That's when she dropped her head into her hands and she just cried like a baby. It was so sad, I almost cried myself. Crept out of there as quiet as I could.

No you're right, I sure didn't want to disturb her then...

Pardon me?

Oh the pantry, yea, I'm coming to that. Well, she must have made the jelly that day and I think she just mixed all those petals in with it. No, I'm sure of it. There's two little jars of red jelly with yellow and pink polka-dots in her cupboard right beside the rest of this year's preserves.

No, it has to be, she put a label on them. Called them "Joe's Flowers."

That's only half of it Louise. Next to Joe's Flowers, she filled one of those old Crown jars, and called it, "Sorry."

Sorry? No I said the jar is called "Sorry."

What's in it? Well, I tell you, after her crying like that, I was worried about her and I went back a few days later to see how she was making out.

Oh, she seemed ok, but it was what she was doing that looked pretty strange to me. She didn't even try to hide it either, just continued with her cooking and offered me some tea. She was boiling up some vinegar, salt and water and she had a big jar on the table full of torn up cards, sympathy cards from what I could tell.

No, I saw her. She poured the boiling brine into that jar, just as if she were making pickles.

"Words that people can't say to your face, they'll send in a card," That's all she said about it and put the rubber jar-ring on, then the glass lid and sealed it up.

Oh, believe me and it looks even stranger in the jar. All those floaty little bits of words, "for your loss," "So very sorry" hanging around in vinegar. You can still see the embossed gold of "My Deepest Sympathy".

Well, I really should have listened to myself after that. I was a bit worried about her, but you know...

Anyway, that's not all Louise.

Beside the jar of "Sorry" she's got three jars labeled, "Sweat."

Yeah, Sweat....

I don't know for sure and I don't dare shake them. She told me once that you should never shake a jar of preserves.

No, she didn't say why, but, it looked like bits of torn shirts. I saw a button still attached and I thought I recognized the plaid from one of Joe's coats.

Oh I know Louise, but really, it's what's next to them that's the worst. She's got five jars full of about 10 years worth of Canadian tire money she'd been saving and...

Of course I'm sure, all in little pieces and sealed up right beside the rest of the jam.

I'm sure of it, Louise, I saw her do it, I mean, I didn't actually see her tear up the money, cause I don't think I could have let her, but,

Oh I know, think of all the things that money could have got. And you'll never imagine what she's called them?

"Patience Do Not Open." No, I saw her do it.

I brought in her mail one day and there she was stuffing them into the jars and when I asked her what in heavens name she was up to she just looked at me and said, Joe always used to say that she was so patient, but he had it wrong. She said she figured she'd just been waiting, waiting for something – and the worst of it was she didn't even know for what.

She said, all those years with Joe and only the beginning and the ending had something she could remember.

Said, if her life was a sandwich, all she could hold onto were two pieces of bread. What happened to the middle? she asked. What happened to the meat of that huge sandwich of time? she wanted to know.

No time doesn't stop for anyone you're right there. All these years she said she'd mistook waiting for patience and she's not waiting anymore.

No, I didn't know what to say.

Well after that, I think she just went right off her rocker.

No, it's only that the last two jars in that cupboard are even stranger.

One of them looks like it's full of dirt.

Dirt, you know - from the garden. She put her own name on that one.

And the other's just an empty jar.

No, I know she did it on purpose.

cause she's labelled it, "Nothing at all"

No, nothing, Louise, she labelled the jar "Nothing at all."

Haven't a clue and she's gone so we can't ask her.

No, she didn't say when she would be back.

Sure why don't you come down. We could go over if you want.

Oh, sorry. Louise, I have to go. Someone's at the door, call me tomorrow.

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