

That's Grace Too

by Gary Percesepe

My son lies on the sofa bed in the living room with a red and yellow sleeping bag pulled up to his chin. The same bag, it's true, that I used to cover Kathleen the night we slept in the tent in Vermont. Rain falls faintly on the tin roof above our heads.

I like it that this blanket that once covered Kathleen now covers him.

Rain fell that night in Vermont. We drove around the campground looking for the slot we'd rented, joking that two college graduates should be able to count. We had rented lot 45 but couldn't find it in the dark. Laughter was a relief. I started in on the tent while Kathleen pumped up the air mattresses. She looked over at me. I was having a harder time. The tent was new, it was dark by now, the instructions were useless, and it was coming slowly. I didn't want to ask our new neighbors for help. Or worse, her. When I got the tent up she looked pleased. We kissed in the light rain, then went inside to our new home.

We made love that night, safe and dry and happy. The rain all night. We had travelled a long way to arrive completely in that moment. I swear to you, I was happy.

We didn't bother to zip the sleeping bag. It covered us both like a blanket, but as we slept she got most of it, and I shivered beside her, glad to give it to her, happy that this was something I could do for her. It pleased me that I could keep her warm, even if it was only for this one night.

One of the tent poles collapsed. It waved like a dog leg in the wind and the rain in the chilled night air. Kathleen got up to pee. She tapped the broken pole with a manicured fingernail. I wondered if the tent would collapse. We shrugged and went back inside.

My son talks to me about a book set in Montreal, but I am thinking of the first meal I bought Kathleen, the little cafe where we

kissed for the first time, admitted we were scared, and tried to see the future.

My son remarks how comfortable it is, this sleeping bag, and this pleases me. It pleases me that the bag that warms him once warmed Kathleen, even if it didn't warm me. The night that Kathleen and I used it (she more than me) I stayed up most of the night watching her. I combed my fingers through her hair, placing the long ends in my mouth. I smelled the smoky woods, heard the fire hiss as I stroked her arms, kissed her fingers, admired the swell of her breasts through her cotton shirt. We were lovers. And something else, we were friends

Later, we exchanged the tent for a motel room by the interstate. I'd lie in bed and listen to her shower, then ask if I could watch her do her makeup and hair. She'd brush it one hundred strokes, humming softly, standing absently in front of the mirror, planning her day. It was summer. I'd made this time for us, and we were happy. An interlude, she called it--she was giving me this *interlude*, giving it to us, and it was clear from the way she said it that it was full of grace, this moment. I tried to take it in, the way you look at the mountains when you're from the flats, not knowing when you'd get out west again, if maybe this was your last sight--how could you know? This is the way I looked at her at first light. I tried to memorize the way that she moved in that early morning motel light.

Things change, don't they? Some things you give up. If you're lucky you get more. And the *more* never replaces what you once had, it just stands tenderly beside it, guarding it maybe--or maybe it just makes it easier, I don't know. A new sight comes along, new memories, new ways of seeing. New people enter your life to move you on. No, the things you give up you don't ever get back, but if you're lucky you get new things, not replacements, exactly, but just new things to keep you moving. To keep you whole. And that's grace, too.

I wrote a story once in that same motel. With some difficulty finished the last paragraph, there at the desk on this very computer, then called her at work. I read the ending to her and it was clear to her--clear as it could only be to a woman, to a woman you're in love with--that I had been describing her. "Don't change a word of it," she told me right there on the phone, and she meant it. And I haven't.

There are moments when we take stock, if we can stand it, moments that feel crippled but still half hopeful, moments we think that-- if it can last, *this moment*--we'll be all right.

These are moments without consequence, ripped out of some context, that beg for some explanation, though none is given.

Change your life, we think. Then laugh at the thought of that, the sad earnestness of it.

