

Love of a Lifetime

by Laura McCollough Moss

I was three-and-a-half years old in July of 1965. My brother Dan was two, and together we contracted whooping cough that summer. We had raging fevers and coughed continuously, violently and to the point of vomiting. This posed a problem for our very pregnant mother, because our brother Gil was on his way, unwilling to hold out until our crisis was averted. He was born on July 22nd, too new and fragile to be exposed to us. That's when Grandma Dorothy, my Dad's mother, and Grandma Chase (given name, Ella), my Mom's mother, sprang to the rescue. Dorothy traveled to our house and became full-time nursemaid to Dan and me. She cleaned up all that spewed forth from us and slept between us in bed at night. When we coughed to the point of near strangulation, she reached for us in the dark, pulling us to an upright position by the hair of our heads if she touched that first. Terrified, she had to get us to sit up and resume breathing by whatever means necessary. Ella's contribution was that of picking up newborn Gil at the hospital and taking him to her house. The first order of business was soothing her crying, post-partum daughter through the separation from her baby and the return home to tend to three kids, two of them sick (brother Rick was eight, and healthy). Then, for two weeks she endured the sleepless nights of a new mother; feeding, changing, burping, cuddling and coping as best she could. We were lucky to have such loving and involved grandmothers. These were not women who phoned the job in, writing postcards from tropical vacations and signing birthday cards. They were there for us whenever we needed them; as we so often did throughout our growing-up years and beyond.

Fast-forward to the summer of 1979, the year I swooned over the seat of a young man's Levi corduroys as he bent over, hard at work in the frozen food section of the Super Duper where we both worked. We had been dating for a short time when, one day, Mike's father called him.

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"We're going to go and take my Dad some money," he told me.

I was eighteen, and the idea of giving my parents money, although we'd never had much, was foreign to me. "Why?"

"He asked me for ten dollars for food," Mike said.

I went into his bedroom to fluff my hair or whatever I thought would make me appear a suitable companion for this man's son. I walked back into the kitchen to find my twenty-three year old future husband making a sandwich at the counter.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm packing him a lunch," he replied quietly.

"But I thought you were taking him money for food?"

He folded the paper bag closed. "He's going to drink with the money. I want him to have something to eat."

I know today about alcoholic families and co-dependence, but what I witnessed was a child's unconditional love.

I was a young mother in 1982. My Katie was just over a year old, and I had enrolled in nursing school full-time in addition to my part-time job as a checkout girl. Mike did a great job taking care of her and keeping things in order at home, but I was often overwhelmed with work, guilt and responsibility. One night I had gone to bed exhausted. About an hour later, my baby was crying, and I went to her. I had a city bus to catch in five or six hours, but I sat rocking my daughter while the world slept quietly and time stood still. Held tight against me with her feet in my lap, she was the perfect height to rest her head on my shoulder, breathing softly into my neck. I told myself that I would remember that night forever, and I have. That was the night my life's priorities were clearly revealed to me.

My son Jesse made the scene in 1988, and was two or three years old when I gashed my finger doing dishes. Dan, a bachelor at the time, was staying with us, and assured me that he had everything under control while I took myself to the Emergency Room for stitches. He busied himself finishing the dishes and, soon afterward, Jesse called to him from the bathroom.

"Uncle Dan, I need you to wipe me," Jesse yelled.

Dan would go on to have two children and wipe many, many a fanny, but on that particular day he was a rookie.

"Sorry, Dukie," he chuckled. "Uncle Dan doesn't wipe."

The kid cried, and Uncle Dan had no choice. The situation was addressed, however gingerly and reluctantly, and I returned home with my finger-splint just in time to hear the tale.

"Sorry," I laughed.

"No problem," Dan said. "What could I do? He needed me."

Love is easy when all is going well, but it is one of life's profound, humbling lessons that few people love you enough to wipe your butt.

My father was diagnosed with Squamous Cell lung cancer in August 2009, and the news rocked our worlds. Mom had had breast cancer fifteen years earlier and had survived gratefully, but with the nagging fear of recurrence. His diagnosis took us completely by surprise. That evening, as we sat together absorbing the news, Bud said "I never thought I'd get cancer. Did you, Sue?"

Without missing a beat his wife of forty-nine years quipped, "Nope. I thought your driving would kill you."

Bud got through surgery with a Stage 1b diagnosis. He had some post-operative complications, but within four months had come through the worst of it and was improving. We dared hope that life would return to normal. Literally the next day, Susie was also diagnosed with lung cancer. She had started with a harsh, nagging cough as my Dad recovered at home; she called it her 'sympathy cough'. It seemed impossible that this disease could strike us again within such a short time, but strike it did. Mom's outcome was very different, with far more extensive surgery, a Stage 4 diagnosis, a difficult post-operative period, medical rehabilitation, home care and, finally, Hospice care. We took care of her together; my Dad, brothers, Aunts and Uncles, and me. When she was feeling her worst we'd lie in bed with her, within easy reach. My grandmothers' legacy of loving care had come full circle.

Susie died at home as she wished, in the wee hours of a Sunday morning in May 2010, at the age of seventy-one; within five months

of her diagnosis, and nine months after my father's. Gil and I watched her draw her final breath, and although the pain that followed was unlike any we'd known, we realized that the love we shared hadn't gone with her. She had left it with us. Throughout the time we had spent together there had been no drama, no arguments. We laughed and cried on a daily basis, and our bonds were strengthened, just as she wanted it.

It seems, on the subject of love, that it has shown itself to me in a million ways over my lifetime. There was not a singular moment when I understood its impact, but rather an accumulation of moments; each a small, transient miracle of its own. I have been merely a conduit for the love that has come to and through me, and it is my happy privilege to pass it along.

