

Tony and Carmella

Tony walked cautiously, pausing every few steps. He was like a lost puppy, searching for a familiar face, growing more frantic with each passing moment. He was lost, alone, afraid.

Trapped with no chance of escape.

Tony stopped. Closed his eyes. His heart was racing. He remembered to breathe. To breathe deeply, slowly, rhythmically. “Where did I learn that?” he wondered. The slow, calculated breathing calmed him. Opening his eyes, Tony felt himself emerging from a fog. The lush green grass and the trees of the park to his left were familiar. “Where am I?” he questioned himself. “I know this place.” He was still confused, but his mind was racing. The building on the opposite corner looked familiar. It was coming back to him. “That’s the Cheswick Deli!” he said to himself. He was elated. His surroundings were beginning to take form. One by one the houses, the buildings, the trees that lined the street, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, all began to align themselves in his mind. The cloud of confusion slipped away like a morning fog retreats and disappears in the light of a new day. He had been here before, many times. He was two blocks from home and safety. At once he felt himself relax. The tension was gone. “Why did I feel so lost? Why the panic?” he asked himself. Tony had no clue.

His mind was lucid once again. Tony walked with a calculated cadence the remaining short distance to his house. He struggled to understand what had happened. As he turned the corner and saw the faded yellow, wood-siding rambler, he smiled to himself. It was a smile of relief and of knowing. A few moments more and he would be safe inside. He had lived in that house for over 40 years. As his steps brought him closer, he was flooded with a torrent of memories.

Tony and his wife, Carmella, bought the house shortly after their marriage. He was a soldier then, returning from three long years of combat and separation. Tony and Carmella’s love

Tony and Carmella

for one another survived those long years apart. It was reflected in the pride and care they put into their home and how they spent their life together. “We’re a work in progress,” he would quip to his colleagues at the factory, excusing himself from the frequent invitations he received to join them for a drink after work. Tony had few friends, there was simply no room for them. Tony and Carmella had been inseparable. They shared life’s daily chores, worked in their garden on weekends, went shopping together and spent their evenings watching television or simply enjoying each other’s company. Their lives were tightly intertwined. They seldom allowed intrusions from the outside world. Together they made their home their retreat. It could never be any other way, Tony had thought, until a long illness finally took Carmella from him. The years following her loss were filled with loneliness. Beautiful, but painful, memories came to him of times lost and of regret for plans they never were able to realize.

Tony reached the front stoop and climbed the three concrete steps that lead to his front door. The steps were cracked and pitted. He fumbled with his keys, trying to remember which to use. The door had once been a deep, rich burgundy that reminded him of the cabernet wine that Carmella and he enjoyed. But now its faded surface was a shadow of its former self. The sun had beaten its striking burgundy surface into a sad, pale pinkish hue with swollen, bare wood grains begging for attention. The handle lock was difficult for Tony. It was stiff and resistant.

As the door finally yielded, the cluttered living room stood before him. The television was playing and the unwashed dishware from last evening’s dinner sat silently on the TV tray table next to his worn and faded easy chair. Photos of Carmella and Tony hung on the wall beside the pastel floral prints that Carmella loved and Tony could never appreciate.

Without much thought, Tony began clearing the remnants of yesterday’s dinner and carried them to the kitchen. He placed the plates, glass and silverware into the sink, took the

Tony and Carmella

empty tea kettle from the stove and began filling it with water. Tony loved his tea. He filled the kettle to the brim. He placed it on the stove top and turned the gas flame on low. “I have work to do,” Tony told himself.

For the first time since entering the kitchen, Tony noticed the bright yellow squares of Post-it Notes on the kitchen cabinet doors and on the refrigerator. “What are they?” he puzzled. He removed one from the refrigerator door. It read, *Put the milk back in the ice box*. At first he thought Carmella was reminding him of his “honey do” list. She had a habit of making lists and notes for Tony, leaving them around the house for him to find. But as he looked more closely, the unsteady cursive writing was his own. He glanced around the room and saw an open milk carton sitting on the counter. He walked across the kitchen floor and reached for the carton. As he raised the warm, half-filled open container to his nose, he understood.

He froze for a moment, his eyes fixed, unblinking, unfocused. The spell broke as quickly as it had arrived. Tony’s head began to spin. The yellow squares, pasted haphazardly on the walls and cabinet doors, came into focus and appeared to multiply before his eyes. There was no pattern to their placement. All were single squares except for one! Above the toaster, on the cupboard door, were two yellow squares so close together that they formed a rectangle. For that reason, they stood apart from the rest. Each of the two squares, so closely joined, had three large, bold, hand-drawn stars at their top. The stars begged for attention, noting something important for an attentive observer. The first square contained a warning, *You can’t let it get worse!* While the second square screamed a command, *Do something about it!*

There was no pause in Tony’s mind. As he read the notes, thoughts of Carmella rushed into his head. He remembered now the long battle she had fought. He remembered as the days passed, she grew further and further from him, until he became a stranger in her eyes. She would

Tony and Carmella

call for Tony and cry for him to sit beside her. But when he did, she pushed him away, demanding that he find her handsome young soldier husband and bring him to her. She feared the stranger close to her, crying and demanding that he leave. She refused the meals and medications he tried in vain to give her.

Tony could not remember having a lucid moment like this before. He did not want it to disappear. He took the yellow squares from the cupboard door and read them again to himself. *You can't let it get worse! Do something about it!* He had written the note. He recognized his own handwriting, but he could not remember doing it. He knew what had to be done.

Tony moved quickly and deliberately. Instinctively, he knew this moment of lucidity might fade at any moment. He gripped the notes in his left hand and stepped across the kitchen to the basement door. He opened the door, flipped on the light switch, and with unsteady steps, began his descent. The stairs were worn and bare. Each step on the hard wood echoed against the cold concrete basement walls.

The basement had been his world when he was younger. It was his workshop, his creative space. So many beautiful pieces of craftsmanship had emerged from his hands in this space, each a delight to Carmella. He couldn't remember the last time he had stepped down here or what had been his last creation. The air was musty and the light was dim. The door and windows hadn't been open for a very long time. In front of him stood the large work bench he had built for himself. It was covered with an array of well-worn hand tools. Near his work bench was a table saw, still covered with a thick layer of sawdust, the residue of a project completed long ago.

Tony cleared a space on the top of the work bench and placed the notes he had carried onto the work bench. He reached below the bench and struggled to pull out his toolbox. It was heavier than he had remembered. It had once been shiny and new, but now its gray metal exterior

Tony and Carmella

was pitted with rust. Its finish was dull. He gently placed the box in the space he had cleared on the bench. Tony paused for a moment. Struggling with his thoughts, trying to decide if this was what he needed to do. Slowly he opened his toolbox, again pausing for a moment to reflect on the choice he had made. He removed the top tray from the inside of the box and placed it to one side. It contained an array of screwdrivers, pliers, wrenches and wire cutters. He then reached into the bottom and removed a heavy, bulky item wrapped in oil cloth. He placed it on the bench top. Once again, he reached into the toolbox and lifted a small, but heavy cardboard box. He placed it next to the object in the oil cloth.

Tony carefully unwrapped the object in the oil cloth and held in his hand the 45 semi-automatic pistol that he had brought home at the war's end. Tony released the cartridge clip from the pistol's handle. He opened the cardboard container, took shells from the box and began loading the clip.

Before he could complete the task, the tea kettle in the kitchen above him began its high-pitched scream, demanding immediate attention.

Tony laid the gun, the clip and the shells back on the work bench. He moved quickly to the stairs. With deliberate, but cautioned steps, he ascended them. Unconsciously, as he reached the top of the stairs, he turned out the basement light. Stepping into the kitchen, he closed the door behind him. Carmella had reminded him so many times about turning out the lights and keeping the basement door closed after his work, that his movements had become second nature to him.

Tony reached the stove and turned off the gas. The screaming kettle was silenced. He pulled the tea canister from the shelf, opened its lid and removed the last packet of Earl Grey tea.

Tony and Carmella

Earl Grey was his favorite. Placing the tea packet into his cup, he carefully poured the hot water over it. "It has to steep for at least three minutes," he told himself.

Instinctively, he reached for the pad of Post-it Notes, took the pen from the counter and wrote, *Buy more Earl Grey*. He removed the note from the pad and placed it on the tea canister.

Tony picked up his cup of tea, walked into the living room, placed the cup on his TV tray table and sat down in his easy chair. The evening news was playing on the television.

Tony sat quietly for a moment, staring at the television screen. He wondered where Carmella had gone. "She'll be back soon," he told himself.