



R is for Regret

Jeannie Meigs

“I’ve only got an hour. God knows how long this is going to take,” my sister mutters. Always been a mutterer, I guess from having an opinion on everything but never wanting to upset anyone. Curse of being the oldest child. She was born in January and I in December of the same year.

“Your kids are in junior high now. They’re not going to burn the house down if you leave them alone for an afternoon,” I reply.

“Middle school,” she mutters. “It’s called ‘middle school’ now.”

“Picky, picky. We’ve really got to get this tree packed up.” I don’t mention the main reason we’re here, in our newly vacant childhood home. I look at the pile of empty boxes labeled ‘Xmas’ and think back to helping Dad trim the tree Thanksgiving morning while the turkey roasted. My sister and her family were out-of-town at her in-laws’. It had been years since I’d spent an entire day alone with my dad. “The realtor chick emailed me again.”

”It takes as long as it takes. We’re not even halfway through the sorting. Nobody’s buying houses until spring or summer anyway. And please don’t call her a ‘chick’ in front of the kids. They look up to you.” Then she mutters that we also have to get his suit. The actual reason we’re here.

“When do they need it? And there’s no law it has to be a suit. I haven’t seen him in a suit since Mom’s funeral.” I realize I’m being unnecessarily contrary, but that’s my curse.

“No law just tradition. I promised before noon tomorrow. If we get on with it, you can drop it off on the way home.”

“Why me?” I wince at the whine in my voice.

“If I’m not back soon, one of them will start cooking. And both have homework,” she adds. Then mutters that no one is waiting at home for me.

“Don’t they get a week off when a grandparent passes away?”

“I doubt it’s a week, especially since we don’t have to travel. Everything is harder with online school. And working from home on top of teaching them? Chaos.”

“I didn’t realize. So let’s compromise. The tree and outfit today and leave the rest ‘til after the funeral.”

“Thanks,” she says, using her phone to take a few pictures of the tree.

“Can you send me a copy?” I ask. “My phone’s in the car.”

“You bet. But it is an artificial tree. If we don’t finish today, it’ll be okay.” She

takes two of the empty holiday boxes and writes her name on one and mine on the other. “This’ll be the last time all these ornaments are together.”

“At least we don’t have to fight over them. We’re lucky Mom had a system,” I say, referring to the tradition beginning with our first Christmas. Mom bought two similar ornaments beginning with apples for ‘A’ that year, butterflies the next, castles the third, and so on. She tried to tie the keepsakes to our interests, such as pigs for the ‘P’ year—even though we were in college—since “Charlotte’s Web” had been a favorite.

“It should be a suit. People will criticize.”

“For a closed casket? Who will know? What about one of his favorite shirts?”

“Okay, sure,” she agrees with a cracking voice.

“If it means that much, pick a suit. I’m not going to be a hard ass.”

“It’s not that. I’m sad it has to be closed casket.”

“We don’t know if he even wanted an open casket or cremation or burial or what.

We just have to guess.”

“If I’d called, it wouldn’t have been a week ‘til we found him at the cabin.”

“You can’t beat yourself up over that. He could’ve called us or 911.”

“I know but I’m still sad. I think I’ll always be sad. And guilty.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s always been stoic.”

“And paranoid about hospitals after the debacle with Mom.”

“You mean the debacle called cancer?”

“No, the debacle of her dying alone because they were too lazy to call any of us!”

“Too busy, not too lazy.”

“I’m still angry Dad screwed her obituary up, too. Insisted on doing it all himself and then made it sound like her biggest accomplishment was being his wife.”

“Well, he died alone, too!”

“Only because he was too stubborn to call someone.”

“You don’t know that.”

“And you don’t know he wanted his casket open! You can’t take responsibility for everything.”

“That’s my problem, I do feel responsible for what happened to Dad. It just replays in my head, ‘You should have called him. You should have checked on him.’ There are so many things I meant to do with him. So many conversations I should’ve had. Questions I should’ve asked. Like whether he wanted to spend eternity in a suit or a sweatshirt. And I do know it’s not my fault, but it feels like it is.”

“I doubt Dad would want you to be tormenting yourself. Over any of this.”

“And I know Mom wouldn’t want you to torment yourself or become bitter because she died alone. She’d want you to enjoy life.”

“They both would. And neither one tried to con us into believing they were perfect. We just have to do our best. Even if we’d sat them down and had all those conversations about morbid topics, there would still be dozens of other conversations we’d be wishing for right now. Because they were interesting people, at least to us. We could never have done enough for them or had enough time with them. We wish they were still here and we always will, even when we’re ancient.”

“Let’s figure out his outfit and drop it off together,” says my sister.

“But shoes, too? Really?” I ask.

“God, you’re a brat,” she sighs, without muttering.

