

Charley Trent was dying of a brain tumor that was also destroying his memories, year by year. His wife, Maggie, fought the frustration of those fading memories by adapting Charley's surroundings, and the people in them, to agree with those memories.

Thanks for the Memories

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Richard Lemmon

CHAPTER 1

Maggie did her best not to awaken Charley as she finished dusting the bedroom of their comfortable Houston condo. Another of his headaches, meaning she'd better stay clear. He'd been this way, and worse, ever since his retirement, and truth be known, well before. Dr. Andrews was right to insist on the CT scan if for no other reason than to be safe.

"That you?" Charley was up on an elbow, blinking in the light through the white linen curtains. "Shut the drapes." He fell back on the bed..

"Thy dutiful wife agrees," Maggie whispered. The problem now was the room was too dark for an adequate cleaning. She nonetheless smiled and sat down on the side of the bed.

"Do you want something?" Charley asked, one eye open.

"I was just thinking how lucky we were to get an early appointment to view the results of your CT scan, dear."

"You don't have to clump around like some elephant in heat."

Maggie bit off a sharp rebuke then relaxed when she saw the rare smile in his eyes as he sat up. Only to fall back with an angry growl.

"Dizzy, all the time dizzy and I never should have agreed to that damn

CT scan. Just another way of charging more for a check-up when the company's thinking about reducing health benefits."

Maggie ran a playful finger up and down his arm. "Hush, Mr. Grumpy."

Charley shook his head and pointed to the picture of his Mother across the room. "Did we hear from her this week?"

This week? My God, it had been at least a year.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes, dear, and I'd guess that your Mother is just having too much fun in Florida to write us. But quit pretending you're not interested in what the CT scan shows. I'm hoping," her voice lightened, "that it'll finally prove you have a brain." She leaned over and planted a kiss on his forehead. Charley winced. "Another of those headaches?"

He nodded and closed his eyes. "This one hurts a lot worse than even those damn migraines I used to get when I was younger."

"Should I turn you in for a younger model?"

Charley tried for a smile in the face of another grimace. "Exactly when did Doc Andrews say the scan results would be ready? I don't want to go there till then. Half-hour in the outer office, same in one of those little examining rooms...who the hell do doctors think they are nowadays?"

She bent over and whispered, "Relax. We have medical benefits."

"Complete with rising co-pays!"

"Aren't you the one who told me to only worry about things we can control?"

"You sound like a full-fledged member of the Tooth Fairy Brigade, Maggie"

"Remember your Father? He trusted all the way up to the casket."

"Are you suggesting reality would have cured his Parkinson's?" Charley said.

"A quicker diagnosis by a better qualified doctor would have. Same with me. Talk about your hypocritical...whatever the word is...oath!"

Maggie laughed and started for the door. "Think maybe a good cup of coffee will help that headache?"

"Might." He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. Slowly. "After that, assuming you didn't make the coffee yesterday, maybe" he forced a grin, "maybe all we need is what they call an afternoon delight. How long has it been? Two, three months? And we used to do it almost every night. Maybe I'm just stressed out."

She stopped at the door and looked back in surprise. "Men! The sky could be falling and all they care about is sex. I heard somewhere, my Liege," she curtsied, "that men think about sex twenty times an hour. Can you wait until I return with the coffee?"

"I guess."

On the way to the kitchen she wondered if a place closer to their daughter might be helpful, given Charley's deteriorating condition. A smaller place too, but certainly no smaller than the one room they started with in Rhode Island. In the kitchen she re-heated the coffee, burned a piece of toast and returned to the bedroom. Charley was still in bed, snoring, and she put down the coffee and toast on a nearby table and shook him gently. "Thy coffee has arrived, sire."

Charley sighed, pulled her down on the bed and fumbled with her blouse. "Hell with the coffee, I'll get it later."

"Not too much later," Maggie warned, helping with the buttons. "Our appointment with Doctor Andrews is in a couple of hours. I thought you had a headache."

"Nothing a little loving won't cure." He laughed then, one of the few times he'd done that this week and next directed his efforts toward pulling down her skirt. Without use of the zipper. Maggie shook her head and helped him there too, ignoring her light brown hair as it tumbled loose around her shoulders. It was her turn to smile now as she slowly took off her bra. There was a time when he would have helped but the fact that he was finally interested would have to do. "Just the way you've always preferred me, sire," She dropped the bar on the floor as she reached out, grabbed his hand and pulled it over to her panties...everything but guide him into her. "Ready, honey?"

Charley started to smile, froze and then backed off, shaking his

head. "The spirit's ready, but not the flesh." He lay back on the bed and sighed. "I give up."

"All men have trouble every now and again," she whispered into his ear as she lay alongside him on the bed, stroking his hand.

"Remember when you got drunk that time at Marian's party and you wanted to but couldn't? Or maybe you forgot to take one of your pills. Whatever the case, honey, worry won't work. Relax will. Try it."

"This isn't the first time and you know it, Maggie. You more than anyone else. And those pills you speak of...I threw them away a long time ago. They no longer work. Jesus Christ, what the hell is going on with me when I can't even make love to my wife."

She hugged him tight as they rocked gently back and forth on the bed. "You'll be ready and I won't be able to keep up once we find out what's wrong. But whatever you do, tell Doctor Andrews about all of your symptoms. Each and every one."

"You want me to tell another man that I can't even get the goddamn thing hard enough to punch through a wet newspaper?" He was closer to tears than she had ever seen him and she wanted to cry with him. But she couldn't afford such a luxury when he needed someone steady. "Nothing, nothing, is going right for me these days." Charley got up, stumbled once and then straightened up and walked toward the bathroom. Once there he threw his pajamas on the floor and turned around, naked and disbelieving. "I'll go the Doctor's," he shook his finger at Maggie, "but I don't want you to tell him what just happened."

"Whatever you say." Once upon a time, her man would have laughed off this morning and planned for the next time. But these days his attitude was so negative. No laughter, no take it and move on and no sense of perspective anymore. It was bad, he deserved it and tomorrow would be worse. Broad-shouldered and graying though, he still fluttered her heart. He was her man, forever, in sickness and in health, for better or worse. Her man.

Charley sucked in his chest and stared at the reflection in the bathroom mirror. "Goddamn doctors are all the same," he said.

"Graduate from some fancy medical schools financed with my taxes,

set up a practice and hit me with the whole goddamned bill.” He shook his head and walked to the closet where he selected a blue suit and a green shirt. He’d never been much of a dresser, preferring slacks and sport shirts to suits, but he’d never have come up with this combination. Glancing at her hovering reflection in the dresser mirror, he shook his head. “Now what are you looking at?”

“Nothing, dear.” She joined him at the mirror and patted his head. “At our age, colors mean a lot less.”

“You got it.” Charley said as he knotted the tie he’d bought for Halloween. “Did I ever tell you what happened at work that last week?”

“Last week? No, dear.” Maggie shook her head as she zipped up her dress. Time for Charley these days was an implacable enemy. “You’ve been retired for quite a time, but lets talk about it later.”

Charley’s eyebrows went up. “Retired? I’m retired? Since when?”

“You’re retired,” she said simply. “No more work days, no more holidays, no vacations, you’ve retired.”

“No more work days?” He laughed aloud. yesterdays!?” His mouth tightened. “So you’re telling me I can’t report sick with all my headaches and dizziness...and,” his face reddened, ”being unable to get it up, and I’ll forget the yesterdays with pleasure.”

“If anyone says anything, dear, tell them it’s your blood pressure medicine.”

“I was on it before and it didn’t cause this.”

“Tari called.”

Charley stopped. “When?”

“This morning before you woke up.” She walked across the room and stood alongside him at the mirror as she put on her makeup. “Just to say hi and to ask how you felt.”

“And that was it?”

“She’s a lot older now, dear and a little deeper. No longer the rebellious teenager who ran off to California just to spite you. Please Charley, think of her as a mother with a daughter who--”

“If she’s our child, and I’ll take your word on that, how come

she's got a boy's name?"

Maggie paused to stare in amazement. Just what in the hell did he mean with 'I'll take your word on that?' Nevermind. "You're the one that suggested the name Charley, you tell me."

Charley shrugged. "Just a damn funny name for a girl. What'd she want?"

Maggie walked across the room and took her husband's hand. "Tari's coming because she's been a little lonely this last week, dear. Ever since her separation from John."

"I remember John alright! No good and I told her."

Twenty minutes after Charley's exam, the Trents were ushered into the austere office of Dr. William Andrews for a discussion of that examination coupled with the results of the CT scan.

"Sit down, Charles...Maggie," Andrews coaxed, pointing to a faded leather couch in the corner. "Can I get you some carrot juice?"

Charley's mouth soured. "Hard to turn that down but this isn't a social call."

Maggie looked up in alarm. "Charles. Be nice."

CT scan negative underarm, Andrews dragged his chair back to their couch. "So," he ran a thumb along the crease in his pants, "Maggie tells me you love retirement."

"She speaks with forked tongue."

The silence lengthened.

Maggie nervously cleared her throat. "About the CT scan. You said there was a shadow?"

"Plenty of time for that after we talk about today's physical," Andrews said. "But first tell me how Tari's doing since the divorce."

Charley shook his head. "What's this? Bad news shouldn't be discussed? Well get off that kick, Doc. Tari's fine and coming down for a visit." he paused to catch Maggie's eye. "Right?"

"Right, dear." A few hours before and Charley had forgotten Tari, but now he remembered. She'd have to read up on tumors and how they affected you.

Charley turned back to Andrews. "Let's have it, Doc. And don't

bother with the blood pressure being too high and the glucose level being too low. Tell me why, for example, I have trouble taking a leak.”

“The prostrate will eventually respond to the drugs I prescribed. As to the CT scan ...” he capped his fountain pen and held the scan up to the light streaming in from the window as he pointed to a shadow the size of a dime on the 11X14 negative of Charley’s brain. “I’m afraid we’re dealing with a tumor. Malignant or benign I can’t tell you. But if it is malignant, it looks as if it might be a little touchy to get at.”

“I say it’s a defect on the negative,” Charley snapped, “and you ought to check that out first before scaring patients.”

“I’m sorry, Charley.” Andrews shook his head. “I’d change it if I could.”

Charley's face drained of color. "Bullshit. What do you know about tumors?"

"Granted that’s for a specialist to say, Charley, especially with the fact they have better tools to make that judgement.”

"At least give us your best guess,” Maggie whispered, tugging hard on the tiny gold cross Charley had given her on their wedding night. "Sooner, later, a long time later?"

"Again, I’m not..."

“Please!”

“Sooner rather than later,” Andrews whispered.

Maggie turned back to Charley who by then was up and pacing around the room. “Sit down. He admitted he wasn't an expert.”

"I'll walk when I feel like it." Charley paused at the window. "Now lets have the whole goddamn song, note for note."

Andrews sat back in his chair. "If your tumor is malignant and if a surgeon can get to it, you have a chance at a lot of years.”

“Otherwise?” Maggie pleaded.

“Otherwise there's too much uncharted brain on top of that tumor and any surgeon who says that doesn't bother him's a liar. That's as straight as I can talk. No hedging and I've already gone past my expertise. As for a second opinion, I'd suggest Dr. Felix Montoyo.”

"You get a kick-back from him?" Charley asked from the window.

Andrews shook his head. "No, Charley,"

"Please." Maggie's voice faltered, as she rubbed the back of her neck, ignoring the tears that were forming. "Don't send us off like this."

"I can't tell you what I don't know, Maggie." Andrews scooted forward on the chair and patted her hand. "You need an expert for that so please don't forget that second opinion. And if you or Charley don't want Montoyo, call the AMA and--"

"Quack City!"

"You make the appointment," Maggie said.

Andrews smiled and looked a little embarrassed. "I knew that time would be critical so I've already made that appointment. Two weeks from tomorrow in the Medical Building."

Charley came back from the window and stood next to Maggie who put a loving arm around his waist. "We'll be there with bells on just to prove that Bill Andrew's is a charlatan. Right, sweetheart?"

Eyes straight ahead as they walked to the door, Charley nodded.

CHAPTER 2

Forbes Manor was located twenty eight miles south of Dallas and was better known for the two hundred plus oak trees than the three people who were left on the property after the divorce. One of those three people was a woman named Tari Trent Forbes, Maggie and Charley's only daughter. The second one, Anne Forbes, Tari's daughter, was going on five and she was the only thing in Tari's life that mattered anymore. Lastly, Emma, the black housekeeper Tari had been awarded in the divorce, along with the huge house she no longer meant to keep. But early on that rainy Saturday afternoon, that divorce was the last thing on Tari's mind when the phone rang. And rang again when Emma continued with the ironing.

"The phone!" Tari fairly screamed as she pointed to the cordless from her chair near the window. "It really is possible to do two things at the same time, Emma." Tari was a tall woman who wore no makeup because it wasn't needed.

"I'll get it." Emma quit the ironing and shuffled to the phone, nestling it in the crook of a bony shoulder. "Forbes Manor," she began, until the sour look on Tari's face changed it to "Forbes residence." Expressionless then, she listened and then passed the phone to a hovering Tari. "Your Mama and she don't sound too happy."

Tari hurriedly drained her Martini, took the phone and smiled, "Hi, Mom. I was just thinking about you." She turned toward the window to avoid Emma's look of reproach. "Is everything okay?" Whispering an occasional "uh-uh" she listened in mostly silence. Throughout the bitter divorce, Emma had been her tower of strength, but after the divorce, Emma seemed to disapprove of everything she did. Outside the window she watched a strong autumn wind pile the oak leaves against her Hummer, a two year old wedding gift from her ex-husband, John. "Are you sure, Mom?" Tari had stiffened. "Did you get a second opinion? I mean," she was almost stuttering, "he was always so...healthy, never seemed to get even a cold." Her Dad that sick? Couldn't be, at least not until she had a chance to straighten things out with him. Please, God, please.

"We're in the process of getting that second opinion," Maggie's voice was low. "but right now, according to Andrews, that tiny black spot on his brain--you remember I told you about it-- is growing. I think we have to prepare for the worst, dear. Your Father's natural forgetfulness is now an epidemic. Sometimes he calls me Louise...whoever that was...or is."

Tari's grip on the phone tightened. "It could still be benign."

"Andrews says it's best to be sure. We'll know more when we talk to the specialist he recommended."

"Even if it's malignant, Mom, there's a lot of things they can do nowadays. Cut it out, do the chemo thing or maybe even radiation. John's father, you met him at the wedding, had prostate cancer and he beat it with radiation. Of course he's still smoking...or maybe that wasn't the cause. I forget." Her mind was in a whirl.

"Andrews said treatment options depend on the tumor's location. But it's getting harder and harder to manage things at home, dear."

"How are you fixed for money, because--"

"We're doing fine thank you, dear."

"I know Dad's retired and I know you all were never rich, but I am now. Money coming pot of my ears. Please let me help."

"Thank you, dear, but you know your Father's pride and he would never hear of it. Besides, we still have our company medical

insurance and what we've managed to put aside for a trip to Mexico. But on another note, was that Emma who answered?"

Tari chuckled dryly and whispered, hopefully out of range of Emma, "She still thinks she's Mammy in Gone With the Wind but she's coming around. And speaking of coming around, or not in this case, John still won't talk to me except through his lawyer. This is so messy."

"Are you taking good care of our one and only Grandchild?"

"I am and John has set up a trust fund although I get more than enough just to keep Forbes Manor up and running. That Mom, is why I'd like to help with the money."

"We'll see, sweetheart, but in the meantime I want you here beside me and your Father for whatever is coming our way. If nothing is really wrong, fine. Otherwise...look dear. You two may not have been all that comfortable with one another through the years, primarily because you're so much alike, but the past is the past and your Father is still your Father."

Tari closed her eyes and sighed. "If you need me or he needs me, I'm be there. But just between the two of us, and maybe this isn't the time, but there was a lot more between Dad and me than just being uncomfortable with one another. But I'm on my way come what may. What should I do with Anne?"

"Bring her with you, she's always welcome or have Emma watch her."

"I'd better see what's up with Dad, and you're right, Emma can watch her in the meantime. I wouldn't know what to do without here to be honest. She's my strong right hand. But I can't be away from Anne for a long time."

"Whatever you have to do, come, Tari. Be there for your Father as I know he would be there for you. I need you. And as to Anne, don't forget your Father is her Grandfather and I want the two of them to get to know one another. While they can."

Tari sighed again. "I hope that he's mellowed some concerning me, Mom, but mellow or not, I wouldn't for the world shortchange his memories or Anne's."

Maggie's voice took on a note of concern. "There's always that tone of reserve in your voice concerning your Father, Tari, and we have to talk about that. Either flesh it out or throw it away. He loves you, you love him and we all need to be there for him. Now. You're such an imaginative girl, Tari, too imaginative frankly, and that's another thing I want to talk to you about. Fathers in general are always shadowy figures to their children. Guys you never see until the sun is low in the sky. Disciplinarians. Wait until I tell your Father although in Charley's case he was more the spoiler."

"Dad the spoiler?" Tari laughed aloud. "We do indeed have a lot of things of things to talk about, Mom. But I'll be there and in the meantime, take care." Phone back on the table, Tari reflected on what her Mother had said about her being too imaginative. Baloney. There had only been two men in her life and she hadn't imagined that they both had let her down. Nor had those two men liked one another. She could still hear her Father saying, "Your John boy is a big time lawyer with an eye for the dollar. Don't be surprised and don't expect too much from him, Tari." Those warnings, however right, had caused her to go the other way with John for awhile. If her Father was against him, she was for him, and she rather saw him as the country lawyer defending the poor. Only to find out, a year after the marriage, that her husband was what they called a tort lawyer interested only in big settlements. So much for her imaginings. John was a man who would gladly take the devil's case if he had enough money.

"How was your Mama, Miss Tari?" Emma had returned to the ironing board. "Sounds to me like your Daddy's not feeling all that good. Never met him but I'd like to."

A hint? Tari stared at Emma and then shrugged. "Can you take care of Anne if I have to go back home for awhile? Help her with her reading and cook for her?"

"Outside the reading part where I'm not too good, must I remind you I'm also the cook?"

"If Mister John calls when I'm gone, tell him I'm in Houston to visit my parents."

Emma nodded. "And you tell Miss Maggie not to worry none."

Miss Anne'll be in good hands."
Tari got up in search of her suitcase.

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