

## Three

### How Not to be a Sucker

Human beings come to this world with an intrinsic compulsion to do purposeful, meaningful work. One of the reasons I dislike certain types of exercise is the knowledge that the expenditure of energy will not take me to a desired physical location at the end of it. However, a Macy's One-Day Sale is a real reason to walk. One must get from the car, across the parking lot to the door. My first experience with the workplace began as a volunteer at the church where I grew up in a position that used to be called, "office clerk." Long, long before I understood how babies came, Sunday school taught me that in the very beginning people were thoughtfully created with the intention that they would be capable to co-create with God.

I began to reevaluate my own life's purpose around age 40. I asked, what kind of harvest should I expect at the end of the growing season of my life if I continued to produce the weeds I was nurturing now? Over 25 years of being a minister's wife developed in me a dispassionate attitude about the end of life. We are born; we live; we die. Whaddaboudit? It's life. Performing, planning, and witnessing the ceremonies and celebrations associated with life events were simply parts of a ministerial couple's life. I had witnessed the gradual decline of one person after another over the years, but one such event affected me because the one declining was my husband's elder sister—a half generation away from me, but a half generation too close. October harvest suddenly leaped out of a field and was staring me down in the middle of the road.

My husband and I would regularly go to a nursing home to visit his elder sister, Big Sister Lyn, who seemed to grow smaller and smaller every time we saw her. She had been ill for a long time. Sometimes she would lie sleeping in her narrow, metal bed while my husband and a few of his siblings chuckled over tales from the adventures of their school days. Meanwhile, I collected data from the room with my eyes. "So, this is it," I counseled with myself silently. This is what it all comes down to: you battle your way up the corporate ladder. You buy a home with three floors, an attic, and a basement. You wear ruby earrings, eat in good restaurants, and make money. You get married and have kids. They grow up, get married and move away. You end

as you began with just the two of you dreaming with each other across the table. He leaves first.

The next part I have witnessed too many times and prayed it would not be the final scene in the last act of “my time on stage.”:

Home is a little, snow-blind white room with one window, a twin bed, and a nightstand. No designer clothes and accessories—just T-shirts and elastic waistband pants that make it easy for somebody else to keep your corporal frame from being indecently exposed. The perfume: Eau-de-antibacterial soap and disinfectant. Nobody cares that you were once a fashion diva. Nobody cares that you once swooned to Beethoven or Sinatra and adored the ballet. No manicure. Lunch gets wedged under ragged, excessively long, darkly streaked fingernails. No fashionable coif; bare, pale face. There is no mind-engaging art to gaze at—just a bare wall. No scintillating music—just silence. Life becomes more like sitting in Other Side’s waiting room, thumbing through crackling, old magazines while listening for the receptionist to call your name. *“Heaven will see you now ...”*

The image of a shrunken woman lying alone in bed scored itself into my brain below my consciousness. I tried to wash it out with the thought, “I am still young. I still have ‘potential’. I was still young. I still had “promise.”

Finally, the last straw: retirement. We downsized our two-floor-with-attic- and-basement home and moved into a unit in a seniors’ high-rise. Residents. *Inmates!* All during the walk-through at my potential new home, my mind was screaming, No! No! No! It is not happening to me! I am NOT an old woman!