

## **“COMING HOME”**

by, G. Thomas Hedlund

Mike Tremont lounged in his recliner, his legs dangling over the armrest that belched its stuffing through the fraying fabric. In one hand he clicked the remote, flipping through two hundred channels of the same useless crap. In the other he sloshed a half-drained can of the cheapest beer money could buy. He didn't like to skimp when it came to his weekend booze, but with his daughter finishing up her freshman year in college, and his wife's lackluster effort to reapply herself to the American workforce, the budget was stretched to its limit.

He shook his head in short strokes as each channel flipped past. He couldn't believe there was absolutely nothing on. Not even a decent baseball game. Saturday afternoons sucked. Who cared about the Braves anymore, anyway?

Then he felt a familiar pressure build in his gut. His focus drifted away from the screen as he leaned back and opened his mouth. Out poured a window-rattling belch that reverberated through the house, echoing its own obnoxiousness. He muted the TV and craned his neck back, listening for a voice from the other end of the house. It usually followed one of his masterful a cappella solos and though he never gave her protests much credit, his work lingering in the air lost some impact without its accompaniment. Like 'Stairway to Heaven' without drums.

Mike smirked and turned his attention back to the television. Thinking his wife must be ignoring him, or outside, he resumed his mindless channel surfing. He was well into the latter one-hundreds when he was jolted upright in his chair.

"You know," his wife Stephanie said, standing in the doorway of the den, "that is totally unnecessary."

He shook his head but didn't look back.

"You never used to be this disgusting."

Mike couldn't resist. He spun the chair around enough to look at her. He saw the short hair and blotchy complexion and the extra pounds that had attached to her body every year. He knew he

should stop himself, but he couldn't. Hadn't been able to in a long time. Neither of them could.

"Neither did you." He watched the words strike her with a razor's edge and immediately regretted them. 'Why can't I stop?' he thought.

Her body shook and as she hung her head and ducked back out the room she said, "You're a pig."

"Takes one ..." It wouldn't stop.

"I want a divorce." Her voice trailed to him from the hall.

He turned away from the door and in a low voice, barely more than a whisper, said, "Been saying that for ten years."

The television blinked and flashed in colors as a cartoon he didn't recognize rolled forth in its punchy glory. His attention was elsewhere now.

Ten years. Could it be that long? He didn't know. How does one ever know when a good thing goes bad? It develops, or unravels over time. There's usually no concrete moment that you can point to and say, 'There, that's it. That's when you stopped loving me.' In many ways he wished it was that simple. Then he could have some hope to fix it. But life with Stephanie didn't seem destined for anything other than over.

Ten years. The petty arguments that turned into something more serious, that turned into quips, and then insults. The physical distance in the bedroom spread as Luann got older and her demands on their time changed. Accusations of infidelities that never happened. The long, cold winter nights spent in separate rooms on opposite ends of the house. They had been falling apart for almost as long as they had been falling in love.

Then, of course, was the therapy. Marriage counseling of the token, sub-moronic Dr. Phil style that only made Mike scratch his head and wonder why he shelled out two hundred bucks a week for it. More fuel for the fire that was devouring their lives.

They kept at each other almost every day, but had somehow managed to keep their failing marriage hidden from Luann. He missed her terribly. Only when she was home did the house feel like a home anymore. In her absence, there was nothing to distract them from that invariable fate stalking them at every turn, waiting for one of them to accept the fact that yes, Luann was grown up, out of the house now, and there was no reason to maintain the charade. No reason to stay together.

Stephanie said it. She'd been saying it for a long time. Words he didn't want to hear and couldn't bring himself to utter: I want a divorce.

Those words echoed in the den long after his obscene gaseous emission and he realized that they weren't cutting him that deep anymore. What did that mean? Was he coming to accept it as a good thing? Or was he merely growing numb to the concept?

He flicked off the t.v. and sat in silence. He couldn't wait to see Luann. She should be on her way home for the summer by now. In fact, she could be walking through the door any moment. 'None too soon,' he thought.

Stephanie was busy cleaning Luann's room, vacuuming, dusting, washing the windows, washing the sheets, and so on. Not that any of it needed to be done. She just wanted her daughter to come home to a clean place. Mike thought Steph just wanted to avoid him as long as she could.

He got up and walked outside. He surveyed his half-acre of lawn and the mess of twigs and leaves still waiting to be picked up from the harsh winter storms. He set to work, not because he wanted to but because he had to. It was about all he felt he had left.

Until Luann comes home.

\*\*\*\*\*

Several hours later, Mike was once again in the recliner sipping the crappy beer and munching on popcorn. Midnight had come and gone. Stephanie was likely unconscious to the world. 'Lethal Weapon' was playing for the zillionth time and he watched the mindless violence with little interest.

He couldn't shake free of an inevitability that snuck around him, slithered up his leg, and wrapped him in a tight bond all afternoon. His marriage was over. He wanted to cry, but he couldn't. There was pain inside, but he kept seeing it as more about throwing away twenty-five years of his life than about losing the love of it.

And she was. Stephanie was, and he knew would always be, the love of his life. The young, fifteen-year-old girl that stole his fifteen-year-old heart from him as easily as slipping a quarter from his hand and into the jukebox to play their song for the very first time.

"God," he sighed to the empty room, "where did it go wrong?"

A firm pounding on his front door jolted him from his chair. He wondered who could be knocking at two in the morning, then realized with a bounce of his heart that Luann was home.

He jumped up and walked, almost trotted, to the front door. He saw Stephanie scrambling to clutch her bathrobe around her and tie it off. Her dour expression that he would beat her to the door made him stop. He didn't know why. It wasn't a competition. He waited for her in the living room, not noticing the blue and red lights on top of the car idling in the driveway.

Stephanie looked at him with soft eyes. In them he thought he caught a glimpse of the girl she had once been. For a very brief moment, the years and the effects of life slipped away, as though they hadn't yet been yanked out of their dreams to catch up to her in the living room. His eyes narrowed and he felt a smile touch his lips. How much of that was for Luann, he didn't know and wouldn't surmise. The moment was over but it had ripped a hole through him all the same. Stephanie deserved to open the door.

'Wait a minute,' he thought, 'she has a key. Why would she ...'

Before he could finish it, Stephanie swung the door open with a smile and the words "Welcome home," tripping from her tongue. Mike couldn't see her face but he knew it went black, just like his heart. Standing on the front steps in the middle of the night were two uniformed police officers. He knew the term 'every parents' worst nightmare.'

For Michael and Stephanie, 'nightmare' couldn't cover it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Six months dragged by like he lugged the burden of three lifetimes behind him. Nothing was the same and Mike knew it would never be. Could never be. But at some point he knew something had to change. He pawed at the leaves on the ground with the plastic rake, not doing much besides simply surrounding himself with autumn. Something other than the misery indoors.

The police couldn't say what happened. Luann could have been pushing too hard to get home and fell asleep, or she may have been distracted, or looking at her cell phone. No one will ever know why

her car drifted off the road just before midnight, but it did and she never had a chance.

Now his marriage was that car and he could see that tree closing in, but he wasn't going to wake Stephanie to steer around it. The time had come to say goodbye.

To read the rest of the story, contact me for a copy:

[mail@GThomasHedlund.com](mailto:mail@GThomasHedlund.com)

Thanks!