

# Wandering Woman

## I Summer Storms

### Chapter Two

#### Gone are the days of wine and roses

Lexington, Kentucky, June 7, 2012

I find each day unique and unplanned as I concentrate on finding new living quarters. I wonder what ever happened to the nitty-gritty routine of the past when I rushed out the door in the morning, tackled rush hour traffic, yearned for the workday to end, and spent the evening recuperating. Granted, such a habitual life lacked excitement and adventure, yet there was security in knowing what to expect and freedom in not trying to make frequent logical decisions. Now, even a specific plan for when or what to eat, I feel discombobulated.

My retirement brought a halt to routine everyday living. I shied away from agendas and lived the motto I professed, “Linger and be available”. This made room for me to be spontaneous. As it so happened, my mother was diagnosed with cancer shortly before I quit working; in fact, her health was a main factor in my decision to retire early. My newfound liberty made it possible for me to spend more quality time with her and I also had the privilege of being her Hospice caregiver near the end of her life.

I think the word retirement is passive; I prefer calling it re-engagement, for that is exactly what happens when many of us retire. We find energy in having more time on our hands and we use that bonus to pursue our interests with a vengeance, such as, volunteering in special interest groups or starting one’s own nonprofit organization to help a cause in which we wholeheartedly believe. I like living in a world of flexibility where I can choose where to spend my time.

However, fourteen years previous to my choice to leave the working world and to become re-engaged, my young children and I faced the life-altering crisis of my husband Joe’s crushing cancer diagnosis and consequent death at the age of fifty. The world as we knew it stopped and stood still for two years as we concentrated on getting a diagnosis. Everyday life disappeared as we pursued answers to Joe’s pain. I suffered with him as he struggled to find relief long enough to sleep. We sought answers through tests, doctors and even surgery; and

when test results were inconclusive, some doctors attributed his suffering to depression since he had recently lost his job.

His first surgery revealed a tumor on his pancreas; however, due to its close proximity to the aorta, it was believed to be inoperable. They ruled the tumor benign at that point and made arrangements for Joe to receive periodic CT scans to track the tumor. As you might guess, we determined that answer unacceptable and began searching for second opinions.

We traveled to Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota for a battery of tests and doctors visits. Joe's biopsies were sent ahead. The surgeon determined that the tumor was most likely cancerous, as indicated by one of the original biopsies, and he scheduled surgery to remove it. Needless to say, it was too late; the cancer had already metastasized to his liver.

The answers we so earnestly sought were exposed and we now knew we had to prepare ourselves, our children, our family and friends for Joe's impending death. Joe lived exactly one year to the day of the diagnosis. His wish was that we live as normally as possible, and that we did.

Fortunately, Joe lived the majority of his final days comfortably and was able to take care of himself. Our family and friends supported us in ways that helped lighten the load. Thence forth, life as we knew it changed forever. Our pre-teen and teenage children and I supported each other and united as one during Joe's time of need. Traveling that journey with him altered our lives and to this day we take care of one another's emotional needs.

Today our adult children stand by me as I experience a continuation of life's challenges through daily discomforts brought on by diabetes and the natural course of aging. Many painful moments are a result of earlier injuries, surgeries or current diseases: the shoulder that I wrenched while playing softball as a young mother now hurts; the carpal tunnel surgeries in both wrists now render them weak and inefficient; neuropathy due to diabetes impedes my ability to do activities comfortably and the feet now require special shoes to help cushion the soles. And I can't deny that Arthur (a.k.a. arthritis) is a big part of these senior years.

I discover at this stage of life that body maintenance is a full-time job. So, I pay closer attention to what I eat and I check my blood sugar more frequently. I exercise regularly and keep moving. I first learned and now teach Tai Chi which helps strengthen bones, muscles and joints. I walk more than drive and I soak in the sun's Vitamin D as much as possible.

Patience and trust are healthier than worry, and so I think positively, accept what each day brings and remember that I am driving the bus. Acceptance for me is going with the flow of life, of being in perfect harmony with the way things are. In “Tao Te Ching”, the classic manual on the art of living written by the old Taoist master Lao-tzu, it is written:

If you look to others for fulfillment,  
you will never truly be fulfilled.  
If your happiness depends on money,  
you will never be happy with yourself.

Be content with what you have;  
rejoice in the way things are.  
When you realize there is nothing lacking,  
the whole world belongs to you.

That brings me to my present circumstance of seeking a new place in which to live.

I start my search by telling my story to family, friends and even to strangers who are interested. I tell them that my roommate is moving out of state and that I'll soon be homeless. I explain that our house is rented and will be sold after we move out. I say that I only own two pieces of furniture, i.e., a recliner and a desk chair, and that I would like to find a furnished room to rent. Their reactions are a combination of surprise, empathy and eagerness to help. I find this brings about results in the form of tips on where to look and whom to ask. I realize I wouldn't have discovered any of this had I tried to fly solo in this adventure; conversing with others in a time of need generates fruitful avenues to pursue.

The race to find a dwelling place begins when I recall an innovative cooperative living venture devised by Esther, a church minister with whom I serve on The Interfaith Alliance board. The Legacy Home is owned and operated by Lexington Cooperative Ministry Inc., a non-profit corporation. The Home is designed for 5 women, 60 years and older, who have modest incomes. They share rent and other expenses to minimize the cost of growing older. It is an opportunity to have my own room and to live in a house again, and a wonderful alternative to large apartment buildings or living alone.

Having had the experience of being one of five in a communal setting in Chicago for two years, I pursue this possibility. I would be the first resident should I decide to sign up. However, I would have to make that choice immediately or take a chance on applying later when a room may not be available.

Weighing this in my mind and heart, I begin to ascertain that my community experience in Chicago had several decisive components that this cooperative venture lacks. First, I knew and had a history with all the members of the Chicago community. Second, the house in which we lived was much larger. Third, the community had an essential common ingredient—we lived as a Sister of St. Francis. However, none of these commonalities made the living situation effortless: we each had our own personalities, likes and dislikes with which to contend; there was no “head of the house” as a family unit might have; and I realized very quickly that there were five matriarchs under one roof.

After pondering this essential comparison, I decide to scratch the cooperative living entry in my racing program.

Diane, whom I met in Chicago and who now lives in Lexington, suggests that I talk with a woman who has a room for rent. The woman recently lost her husband and afterwards her adult daughter moved in with her to help out. We already have a common bond of widowhood. Her neighborhood is close to where I now live. I would love staying in this area and so I schedule a visit.

The street is away from traffic, which I like, and the house is small but lovely. I am greeted at the door by the woman, her daughter, and her daughter’s pony-size dog. We have a nice chat while the dog plops on the couch next to me, taking up a huge amount of space. I soon realize that the daughter intends to live here permanently and I begin to feel claustrophobia rear its head.

My friend, Diane, understands as I scratch this entry.

Soon after Diane and I first met in Chicago, she accepted a position in Kentucky and I helped her transition into this environment. I put her in touch with someone who had connections in the area in which she would be working. We’ve since kept in touch and share our life transitions to this day.

Now that Diane is about to lose the graduate student who rents a room from her, she extends the possibility of my moving into that room and sharing house space with her. This is the first time I get excited because I know and like Diane. We discuss rent and other particulars, and the type of living arrangements we like. It is a given that this transition would be easier for me than any of the other options thus far. I exhale a huge sigh of relief.

Not long afterwards, major life changes develop in Diane's world and she has to sell her house. Scratch entry #3.

Jerri is someone I know in passing at our church. She is partially blind and uses a cane. She walks or takes the bus for transportation. When Jerri hears that I am in need of housing, she invites me to visit her apartment. She takes me on a thorough tour of not only her lodgings but also the entire building. She is very pleased to live here and hopes that I will decide to do the same.

On our tour, I notice several people are walking their pets. Jerri explains that small pets are allowed in the complex. I learned about hypoallergenic pets when Jerri introduced me to Natasha, her Siberian cat. Natasha sports a moderately long coat of beautiful black hair but is hypoallergenic due to the lower-than-average enzyme levels in her saliva. Some people claim that 75 percent of cat allergy sufferers have no reaction to the Siberian. Jerri was overjoyed to discover this breed and treats Natasha like a queen.

This high-rise apartment complex provides affordable housing for seniors age 55 and older. It is centrally located in the heart of downtown Lexington where many shops, libraries, restaurants and even the famous Kentucky Theatre are within walking distance.

I like visiting downtown but do not think I'd enjoy living here for several reasons: the traffic could be a nuisance; the lack of green grass would be devastating; riding the elevator to and from an apartment would be confining; and, I'm not fond of sharing inside space with so many pets. Here goes yet another scratch.

The race for housing continues as moving time draws near. I check Craigs List, the first time ever for me, only to discover some interesting places that seem to disappear over night. I ask more friends, investigate word-of-mouth options, and drive by some leads that have questionable heavy drapes drawn or steep outside stairs leading to an apartment. The scratches continue.

Many times I give up and go home remembering that I have three adult children with whom I could stay until something feasible turns up. I certainly wouldn't prefer that choice but knowing it is an option has a calming affect on me.

I frequently remind myself that change is the only constant in life. It requires courage and faith in a belief that fluctuation is a positive thing. If we don't experience variation in our lives we become stagnant and that sounds like a slow death to me.

Yes, the days of wine and roses, of cut-and-dry everyday garden-variety living that renders a false sense of security, are forever gone. Each day now brings its own surprises. I grab a life jacket and go with the flow and try to smile.