

M.A. ANDERSON

The Big Night

Carol was Betty's pride and joy. First grandchild, top of her class at Wesleyan, and always the first to call with any news. Once Betty took Carol to the Christmas market and Santa asked, "Are you sure she's not your daughter?" Which made Betty feel younger.

But Betty wasn't doing too well, not since the diagnosis. First Fred, now herself. She couldn't tell Carol. It wouldn't be fair. Carol was a newlywed, and about to start her dream job in New York. No, Betty promised herself, not a word of bad news now. Best to just let things be.

Betty missed Fred, his strong embrace, his hearty laugh. No one saw it coming, he went so quickly. He'd quit smoking, and started eating healthy, though Betty was sure he had a private stash of corn nuts somewhere - she could smell it on him. She missed dancing with him in the kitchen, laughing at old Laurel and Hardy movies, sharing a bowl of cherries.

Fifty-three years, she thought. And never apart, except for his stint in the Navy. Thank heavens he could speak a little Spanish and got stationed in the Caribbean. Came back knowing all the latest Latin moves. Maybe he'd had a little señorita down there, but Betty never asked. They were the best rumba dancers at the Elks club.

Fred forced a smile. "I'll be waiting on the other side, my sweet. Ready for a fox-trot and a whiskey sour." Those were his last words. Betty caressed his hands, blue veins bulging across the bony knuckles. Busy hands that had held a hammer, firm hands that had controlled the steering wheel when they skidded on the ice that winter, gentle hands that had stroked their newborn's cheeks.

Betty checked the bedroom. Curtains closed, CD player at the ready with her favorite disc, made by Carol, of course. A few big band songs, some romantic Latin ballads, the Moonlight Sonata, and without fail, Samuel Barber's Adagio for strings.

A violet quilted throw draped the lavender shams on the bed. It was too light to be of any warmth, but just the right color. Her slippers were placed next to the silk prayer cloth, where once favors had been asked of God.

The tea kettle whistled. Never did like that pitch, Betty thought and shuffled into the kitchen. All the ingredients were lined up on the counter, the herbs, the honey, the lemon. She filled the tea egg and dropped it into the pot, then took the ginger cookies out of the oven to cool. She would arrange them carefully on her favorite serving plate, the Wedgewood china. The set would go to Carol.

Betty thumbed her bathrobe pocket, pulled out the emptied vial of white powder, and held it to her chest, then drew a deep breath. Yes, she assured herself, she had mixed in just the right amount. No mess. The pain didn't worry her- it was nothing new. She had already suffered the muscle aches, then the cramping. No chemo. No use in prolonging a feeble, miserable existence. She'd stopped playing cards with her neighbors, seldom left the house, her garden, her easy chair, lace doilies covering its plush arms.

Betty took one last look around. The pale blue curtains, the art books on the coffee table, everything in order. She unlocked the door and patted the couch pillows, just so. Didn't want to leave a mess. She stopped at the mantle to visit with the family members in the photographs. Betty smiled, pressed her fingers against her lips, then reached out to touch the image of her daughter Sarah, so pretty, holding Carol. Sarah seldom showed affection to her mother. She was Daddy's girl. And when Fred passed, mother and daughter hardly spoke.

But now that Betty and Carol were so far apart, pressing on seemed pointless. Betty was ready to join Fred. She lifted her chin and smiled as she raised her arms and glided across the room, allowing Fred to take the lead.

Betty picked up the tray from the counter and set it on her night table. She pressed the play button on her player, and poured some tea, then pulled her tired body into the bed, exhaling, then inhaling, pausing to welcome God between the breaths.

Betty sat up, arms resting at her side, for a long time. No indecision. No prayers. Just acceptance. She hummed along to "Besame Mucho," a song Fred loved - he told her he'd played it over and over again when they were apart. She took a long sip of the tea, warm and sweet on her tongue, and let it glide slowly, deliberately, down her throat. She imagined a curtain of sleep descending, welcomed the darkness that awaits those souls who know their end is near.

She reached over for a cookie and was just about to take a bite when the phone rang. Betty let the answering machine pick up.

"Hi Grammie, it's Carol. Guess what? You're going to be a great-grandmother!"

Mary Anne's poems span fifty years of writing - poetry, song lyrics, and plays, and more. Her versatility stands out in the awards she has received, from a Grammy-nominated song to her recent award for poetry by the Writers' International Network in Vancouver, B.C. Other poems have appeared in Monterey Bay's "Plentitude of Poets" collection; "Ocean Walk" won first prize in the Marina Arts Festival, and her one-woman show "Bar Lies. . . and other tales" premiered at the first Carmel Performing Arts Festival. She also presented a reading of her book *Cronicas de*

un Amor Eternal/Letters to a Love Unsung in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico as a guest of the International Writers' Forum.

Mary Anne has published two chap books, *The Road Home*, poems and photographs, and *Dreamscape*. Other poems can be found in *The Cambrian* and in an upcoming anthology of poetry. She is currently a member of Maui Live Poets, where she is featured regularly, and the Cambria Writers Workshop.