

THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER I'VE EVER MET

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“Mary, come here, I want to pay you the same amount of money that I paid the Japanese gardener.” I don't blame you for being mad. I made a mistake.

There were tears in Mr. Casteline's eyes as he admitted that he had made a mistake, that he should have paid me the same amount of money for cleaning up his back yard as he paid his Japanese gardener for the same duties.

“Please be good to me, don't treat me mean, I just made a mistake.” By this time, he was crying so hard that his old wrinkled face was a blot of red which frightened me so much that I extended my hand and accepted the \$5.00 he was getting out of his wallet to give me for the yard work I did last week.

Old man Casteline, who is nearly 85 years old, has been living next door to me for the past twenty-one years. He and his wife Juliette built the little red brick house consisting of five rooms back in 1948. When they built the house they also purchased a new car, a shiny green Pontiac, which she delighted in driving her husband to work and picking him up at the end of the day. She always wore her hat and gloves and looked as though she had just stepped out of a fashion magazine. They had saved their money to build a nice house to live in during their later years. They were a quiet couple, and seemed to be happy doing things for each other. The house was a culmination of a dream for both of them. This is what they had saved their money for and the dream came true.

Juliette used to tell me when we talked over the back fence that Amiel, her husband, enjoyed eating his steak at the evening meal and how much she enjoyed watching him eat. She seemed to be happy just being able to do things for him.

On week-ends after he completed the yard work, they would go grocery shopping together so that he could carry the heavy grocery bags in for her as she once told me that she was unable to do a lot of lifting because of her back. This proved to be quite true because shortly after Amiel's retirement from his 30 years of working for the cannery, she became quite ill and soon learned that she was a diabetic. She later developed hardening of the arteries and no longer bothered to dye her hair which became stringy and a lifeless gray. She would forget to put a belt on her dress and it just hung on her frail body. Many times, she would get the broom and start sweeping in front of their house and continue sweeping until she had swept the sidewalk around the entire block. I do not know where she got the strength to do this because she looked so frail and so very tired all of the time. When Amiel became aware that she was gone he would become frantic, yelling at the top of his voice for her to get inside the house immediately. When she returned from around the block she would put the broom in the garage, go inside the house, sit down and look into space. She did not acknowledge a word he said to her. I could hear him berating her in not too pleasant language informing her that he was going to lock her up if she was going to continue to go away like that. She had to confine herself to the back yard or it was going to be too bad for her. So, fragile, in a world of her own like a porcelain doll, walking

around in a semi-conscious manner, as though she would crumble to pieces if you rocked the boat.

When her husband gave her medication, she would hold the pills in her mouth and then spit them out when he was not looking. She seemed tired of her very existence; tired of being unable to do all the things she used to do. He had to take over the duties of running the household, and seemed to be doing a pretty good job, in spite of his yelling now and then.

One evening Juliette became violently ill, and was rushed to the hospital and did not return home. He later told me, "she died in a coma during the night." All of the neighbors who knew her turned out for the funeral. In her casket, she seemed to radiate happiness and peace with God.

Mr. Casteline was heartbroken and could not seem to accept the fact that she was gone; that he no longer had to bear the heavy burden of caring for her, and seemed to be in tears constantly. However, he did manage to pull himself together when he finally realized that there was nothing he could do, and it was God's will. So, he started to keep the place clean and to care for himself now that he was left alone in the little brick house.

His son-in-law does his grocery shopping for him on a weekly basis; comes over takes his order, buys the groceries and delivers them. If Mr. Casteline needs anything during the week he telephones one of the neighbors to see if they are going to the store that day. He is pretty good at using the telephone to get results. He also gets around pretty good with the use of his cane. However, if he happens to fall in the back yard he starts to holler at the top of his voice for "Helen" or "Mary", to come over and help him get up. This we have done many times, and he does not seem to be hurt bodily, only his pride. The two neighbors, one on each side of the brick house seem to be pretty good at helping him get up on his feet. Sometimes I wonder where I drew my strength from after I helped him up, as I am only 5 feet tall. I am beginning to believe that God, indeed, moves in silent ways.

There are days when Mr. Casteline becomes very lonely and many times I see tears in his eyes, and he says, I don't care to love any more. I'm going to kill myself.

Needless to say, this scares the hell out of me and I start to talk as quickly as I can to console him and get him out of this terrible depression he seems to be in. I remind him that Juliette would not like to see him carrying on so. This seems to shake him up a bit and he stops crying. I do think that if a person says that they are going to kill themselves it is a call for help.

When loneliness becomes unbearable for this little old man, he telephones one of the neighbors to come over and get some fruit. So, he passes out fruit, sometimes, one or two apples to a neighbor. Take this, I want you to have an apple because I like you, he says.

How do we feel about accepting the fruit? Well, I believe the other neighbors feel the same as I do, it is what kept the old buzzer alive, because he is giving from his heart to those held dear to him. I believe he loves all of us neighbors, because each one of us is a little old lady, and he give an apple or two with love in memory of that one little lady who spent all of her

lifetime being kind and loving and making a comfortable home for him; his dearly departed Juliette.

I grew up watching my mother and father love and care for one another and remember my mother saying that true love is co-constituted and is embodied in the heart. I remember when my mother passed and people would say you will get over it. Not so!