

GULF COAST WRITERS ASSOCIATION

2033 WRITING COMPETITION: 2ND PLACE

SEARCHING FOR ME

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We'd been married a little over three years when I had my meltdown. It surprised even me. I thought I was doing okay. Or okay enough.

I was nearly thirty at the time; my husband was thirty-nine. I was Jim's second wife; he was my one and only. Along with the I-do's, I became stepmom to four kids, his rebellious teenage daughters moving in with us almost immediately, the two younger ones (a girl and a boy) coming on weekends. And then there was his widowed father, paralyzed on his right side and aphasiac from a stroke; he would live with us every June through October, rotating between the homes of his three sons, one in Florida, the other in California and, us, in Connecticut. I didn't go in blindly. I knew all of this was waiting in the wings of my life, part of the marriage commitment. But knowing and *knowing* are two different things.

Energetic and wide-eyed, I buckled down and tackled everything on my plate, including working while attending college — determined to get my degree even if it took the eight years it actually did take — while Jim met the demands of his engineering profession, often working nights and weekends. Everything was in service to those we loved and to the future we envisioned.

While most brides enter the territory of their new life, step by step, kid by kid, I was shopping and cooking, working and studying, managing temperaments and expectations for the lot of us, struggling to weave the threads of our life into a cohesive whole. And, in turns out, losing myself in the process.

We pulled together enough money to buy land and finance the building of what we called our forever home. We served as the general contractors, overseeing every step of the process and doing much of the work ourselves. I was thrilled. I was scared. We were building the home, I was sure, I would die from. It's not that the house itself was going to kill me but that, in all likelihood, it's where I would live until I died. In fact, I actually said that very thing — *out loud*

— while hosting our first Labor Day cookout, one that would establish the traditions for a lifetime of cookouts to come.

“Well, here we are,” I announced, trying for an upbeat tone, a toast to our present and future life, “we’ve just built the house I’m going to die from.”

Looking back, I’m not sure how my voice and body language delivered that statement. Or how it was received. I imagine there were tense sideways glances, solicitous pats on my back, nods and smiles, nobody knowing whether to offer sympathy or congratulations. *And, really, why would there ever be another house?* This one was perfect. Two stories with an inground pool and walk-out basement, set on a pond that gave us ducks and geese. And poop. Yep, there was poop to deal with. In the yard. And in my life.

Everyone wanted something from me. A ride here. A meal they didn’t hate there. A research paper to write, bills to pay, teenagers to shop for, attitudes to quell. And on it went. I was getting into work late and asking professors for extensions on projects. Out went my good humor and bold, artsy style. Out went makeup and long hair curled with hot rollers. I delivered the best I could on all fronts and opted out when it came to me.

Lying in bed, awake at 3 a.m., in what Fitzgerald called the real dark night of the soul, I’d question myself. *What was wrong with me?* Look at what I had: a beautiful home, a caring husband, the promise of a coveted college degree, a houseful of individuals striving to become a family. A forever husband. A forever house. I was secure. *I felt trapped.* This was it. *Was it really?*

I pushed down all of those feelings that beautiful Labor Day afternoon, said no more about dying in this dream house, and silently served dessert.

Fast forward to a crisp November evening. Jim came home from work, found me standing in the dining room looking out the bay window at the darkening sky. The house was unnaturally quiet, only the two of us in this typically noisy and crowded space. His father was now in California; the weekend kids were with their mom, and our teenagers were off with friends.

I was dressed in one of my standard work outfits, this one in basic beige: blouse, skirt, nylons and pumps, neutral and easy, right along with my newly chopped-off hair, a sensible short style.

“Hey there,” Jim said, slipping his arm around my waist. “This is nice.”

“I want a red raincoat,” I responded.

“You have a raincoat,” he answered.

“I want a *red* raincoat.” My voice hit a demanding note.

“Well, okay, you handle the bills. If we can afford it, go out and buy one. If you really think you need it.”

That’s when it happened. The Meltdown.

I slumped to the ground. Tears streamed down my face. A sad figure heaped on the carpeting. Beige, of course. There I was: beige on beige, pounding the floor. “You don’t get it. I want a RED raincoat” I raised my head. “I’m not me anymore. I hate my hair. I hate beige.” I tugged at my polyester blouse wanting to strip it from my body. But all I’d reveal would be a beige bra. “I’m invisible. You couldn’t find me in a crowd if you tried.”

Jim pulled me up and into his arms. “You’re my wife. I’d find you anywhere.” He thumbed my wet cheeks. “You look cute in short hair.” He tugged at the ends, an I-don’t-get-it smile forming along his face. “You don’t even like red.”

I stomped. I cried. I pushed at his chest. “It’s a METAPHOR.”

If I wasn’t so upset I would have laughed at the puzzled look on his face. My poor, mystified, literal-thinking husband. I could see him flashing back to 8th grade English, the words metaphor and simile pulsing through his brain.

“It’s a metaphor.” My voice softened. I’d lost my steam “I don’t need a raincoat. I need me.”

We got through that moment. And in all the years that followed, I never did buy a red raincoat. But, ultimately, I did find me. I shed that neutral uniform, glued and stitched together the people in my life and crafted a family that’s loving and close. I made friends with the short hair and I indulged in a ten dollar psychic reading that put me on the path of my destiny as a writer. We built a home inside our dream house, facing death and illness, meeting challenges, making memories that would carry us into what Jim calls “the autumn of our years.” Over time, there were other melt-downs, other metaphors. Occasionally they were his. Mostly, they were mine.

And then, after nearly 40 years, it was time: we sold our forever home and opted for a new adventure, for a warmer climate, sea-breezes and one floor living. A new forever home. This one, for sure, I would die from.

But once again my clothes were all wrong. They belonged to a northeast woman who’d finally developed the perfect balance between artsy and corporate, between wife and mother and

working woman. That woman didn't belong in a place where skorts and cropped pants were the outfits of the day. Everything about me was stuffy, but I wasn't ready for a deep tan and bedazzled tops. I had no idea who I was in this tropical landscape that people call paradise.

"I'm lost," I confessed to Jim as we sipped wine on our lanai, watching the sun drop into the horizon. "The kids are gone. No they're *there, we're gone*. Our work, our friends. Us. It's all gone. Who am I now?"

"Is this another red raincoat thing?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Maybe. I guess." This time I laughed more than cried.

He swept his arms over my head — strong, caring wings — always there to protect me from life's storms, to find me when I can't find myself. "I've got you covered. We'll figure it out."

Change takes time. And I was feeling that I had so little time left to conquer the challenges that come with a major lifestyle shift. Traversing the unknown when you're pushing past 70 is far different from when you're pushing 30 or 40. Or even 50.

A few days later, Jim walked into the house and handed me a gift bag.

"I think this is a metaphor," he said.

I dug through the tissue paper and unearthed a travel-sized umbrella.

It was red.

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