

As Long As I'm With You

By
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The sun was vibrant, and it lit the world like a candle luminescent to a room. However, no matter how bright and brilliant it was, it could not comfort the sadness that loomed over the crowd. I watched as the burial ended. Slowly, the casket was lowered into the ground, and a final white rose was thrown into the deep grave. In silence, I saw how with dignity, she rose up from her chair. I knew it was all too overpowering for her, and the strength that had engulfed her over the past few days and weeks was now depleting. Falling back into the chair, the tears fell from her eyes as a river flows into the ocean.

Compassion came from all sides. We grabbed her and held her knowing that this was her biggest challenge—the fear of being alone. After fifty years of marriage and having a partner by her side, she was now going to embark on life without him.

Softly, I held her tight and gave her support and strength. She cried. So many tears fell from her eyes like an unstoppable flow with no end. I was numb. I had spent the past few months dealing with the doctor appointments, the chemotherapy treatments, and the reactions to the treatments. I was moving in so many directions that I didn't have a chance to think or to react. I had been calm and collected in exposure as I made the arrangements, wrote the checks, and decided on the flowers.

"It'll be okay, Mom." I heard the words come from my mouth, but I didn't believe them. I knew that she wanted to hear it, but how was I going to make it all okay?

Walking back to the limo, we were all silent. My husband, Alex, to the right of me, uttered not a word: a characteristic of his personality since I had known him. My siblings and their families proceeded to the vehicle as well, all in silence. No one spoke a word about the previous days.

"I'll meet you at the house," I heard Alex say. Not really paying attention, I just nodded as I entered the limo.

"Why isn't Alex coming with us?" My mother questioned.

The silence was broken. Staring at my mother, I said, "He thinks that due to the fact that we are almost divorced, it wouldn't be appropriate for him to come in the limo."

"Ridiculous! Gina, you've been married for twenty-five years. He is part of the family. Stop all this nonsense, already!"

"Mom, I know how you feel. I understand, but I don't want to argue with him or anyone else today. We just buried Daddy. Could we all be at least civil with one another?" I asked or better yet, pleaded.

"Your father would not want this. This . . . this divorce. We don't divorce in our family."

"Well, he isn't here to tell me what to do!" I snapped.

Suddenly, the silence was thick. My mother, turning to look out the window, began to cry. My brother and sister said nothing. I felt bad. I felt guilty, but I needed to say it. As my mom cried, I heard my inner voice telling me to shut up and stop talking.

The rest of the day was active. The house was filled with family and friends coming to share condolences. Some how many of my relatives found out about my up and coming divorce, which lead to questions, shocking expressions, and secret whispers of gossip as if I didn't exist.

It got to a point where I didn't know if the condolences were because of my father's death, or the death of my marriage. All I knew was that in the end, when it was all over, I just wanted to collapse on the sofa in the stillness of the home I was raised in. And I did.

"We're heading back tomorrow." The voice behind me made me jump and almost spill my glass of Merlot.

"So soon? I thought you would stay for a few days."

"Well, George needs to return to work. They only gave him three days and the kids need to get back to school, and I need to go home with them."

“Chicken!” I said.

“What do you mean by that?” My sister, Lucy, snapped.

“Oh, please! You couldn’t wait to leave from the moment you arrived. You know damn well what I’m up against.”

The silence in the room gave evidence to the truth.

Lucy poured herself some wine and sat down on the sofa too, and started to speak very calmly. Which is a challenge for Lucy.

“Look . . . you handle this. You take care of it. I live many miles away. I cannot relocate my family in order to deal with the fact that Mom is not independent.”

“Lucy, you make it sound like some clinical disease.”

“Gina, you’ve been here. You live here. You’ve been part of their lives a lot longer than me. I left at eighteen. I went to school, moved away, and got married. I come back for occasional holidays. I have a life and my family.”

“Like, I don’t?” I snapped.

“Well, right now, sis with your divorce this might be good for you. Umm . . . it might keep your mind on someone else other than yourself.”

“Myself? I do not think that I have been selfish. While your living in South Carolina and our illustrious brother, Tom, has been traveling the globe with his career doing his thing, I’ve been here holding down the fort!”

Lucy just rolled her eyes, and I gave her a smirk.

“Mom trusts you. She always has. You’re the most responsible, and actually, you’re just like Daddy,” she said.

She said it. Why did she have to say it? I hated to admit that she was right, so I just said, sarcastically, “And what about me? What do I need? Or does that not matter.”

“I don’t know what you need. Do you even know? You’re forty-five years old and only you can answer that question.”

Staring at each other, we both fell silent. I started to drink my wine in order to prevent myself from throwing the glass across the room. I hated the fact that she was right. She was right. I knew it, and she knew it, and she knew that I knew that she was right which totally infuriated the shit out of me. So calmly, I continued to sip

my wine and say nothing. That inner voice was yelling at me to shut up and say nothing!

“Look, Gina, I’m not abandoning you. I really do know how Mom is going to be.” She reached for my hand to hold, and I let her as I listened to her speak. “I am fifty. My children are grown and in college. My husband has an active career that I am part of.”

Don’t say anything, I thought, but I didn’t listen. Instead, I blurted out, “You mean your social standing? The . . . ah country club atmosphere wouldn’t work with an aged Italian Mama?”

“Don’t be sarcastic!” Lucy snapped at me.

“Sorry, Luce, but sarcastic is about all I know right now.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re getting divorced!”

I just snarled at her and said, “You just don’t know me at all. The divorce is because I finally want to do the things I never did. Sure, I went to college, I had a job, raised the kids, but all my life, I have wanted something more, and I have lived under someone else’s approval. Mostly Dad’s, and then I needed Alex’s approval. I never felt the confidence to just be me, and do what I want and not seek approval from some male figure in my life. You were different. You just did whatever you wanted.”

“We are different. I never let anyone control me. I never felt that I needed Daddy’s approval or even George’s for that matter.”

Keeping silent, I finished my wine and poured some more into my glass.

“So, I have to be responsible for Mom?” I finally said.

“Actually, No, unless you feel you have to. Mom needs to be responsible for her self, and you need to work out your own issues, and Mom needs to work out hers. All I know is that I have to get back to my life. I’m sorry.”

Getting up and walking toward the stairs, my sister went to bed. We never discussed it anymore. Her plane took off the next day. She headed back to her home and life, and I headed for uncharted waters.

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Some time had passed, and I noticed that my mom was calmer than I had expected. The house was quiet for her, and her daily routine had changed dramatically. With only cooking for one and not having a partner to plan life with, she found herself having a lot of free time. Her friends coaxed her to get out with them, and she did.

My kids resumed their life of high school and our home was somewhat somber as Alex and I were still separated. He and I decided that it would be better if he left the house and got an apartment closer to his office, in the city. We put the divorce on hold and decided to stay separated until we could decide what we really wanted. The divorce just seemed to be too much to handle at the time—for everybody. We both felt that some time apart might help us understand where it was all going.

Our children, though affected, were very level headed about everything. I guess in today's world, with divorce so prevalent in society, they were really the minority coming from a family of parents being together for twenty-five years. I found myself spending more time with my mom, and more time with myself, as well. I also found that I was growing deeper into a depression that I needed to get out of, so one day, I decided to go to church, Out-of-the-blue, and it wasn't even Sunday.

As I entered the church, I could feel the reverence grow inside of me. Everything in my world seemed completely disheveled and out of control. Except for a few older people sitting sporadically amongst the pews, the church was pretty empty. I walked down the aisle and picked a pew close to the altar, and I blessed myself and began to kneel. I really didn't know what to pray for. I was fumbling in my mind when I heard a voice from behind me. It was a familiar voice that said, "Let it go, Gina. Let God take care of it."

I bit my lip as I turned around. I was surprised, but not shocked.

"Hi Mom." I said in a cheery voice.

“Fancy meeting you here,” she said with a smile that was more of a smirk.

I saw the old man to the left motion me to shut up, so I got up and walked over and knelt down next to her and whispered, “I was thinking the same thing about you.”

“Well, I am here and guess what?” She asked.

“What?” I asked.

“The building is still standing,” she said with a grin.

We both chuckled knowing full well that our attendance at mass had its moments in the past.

“So what do you think Daddy is doing now?”

Smiling and giving a small chuckle, she said, “Well, after complaining a bit upon arrival, he’s probably catching up with some old friends.”

“Maybe there’s a good card game going on, Ma.”

“Probably,” she said.

Staring at me, I could tell that she was examining my face. “What’s the matter?” She finally asked.

Her words I heard, but the list of what was wrong was so long that I started to laugh.

“What’s it all about, Ma?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean love . . . marriage . . . kids . . . life? I’m so totally confused.”

“Join the club.” Glancing at the altar, she started to speak quietly. “Oh, Gina, women have wondered the same thing for centuries. Each moment of our life is filled with another thought, another emotion, another action, another problem, and another happiness. It’s tiring after a while keeping up.”

“I don’t know what to do about my marriage, Ma?”

“Gina, sweetie, no one does. Do you think that people married fifty years have the answer? No, we don’t. Look at me. I’m scared to death. I’m afraid to be alone. Your father took care of everything because that was his job, and I had my job, which was you guys, the house, the cooking. I mean it’s what we did. I don’t know if it was right or wrong. It just worked for us. I spent my whole life being a wife and a

mother and now, I don't know who I am. I don't even know how much time I have left. Somewhere in my late seventies, I have to find confidence to be an independent woman. I have so much anxiety right now that a bottle of pills couldn't cure it."

I sat there shocked. It didn't sound like my mother. I mean . . . I didn't expect to hear what she was saying.

"Mom, this doesn't sound like you," I finally said.

"No, it doesn't. I know. But my so-called "good friends" told me that I need to move on with life before I get depressed."

"It hasn't been that long."

"I know honey, but when your seventy-seven, how long are you supposed to take? People are right. I have to deal with it."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I expected my mom to fall apart, and to break down. I didn't know where this was coming from.

"Gina, I have no regrets. I loved your father, and I would follow him anywhere. It wasn't always wonderful or even easy, but it was good. And I know, he loved me. Even if at times it didn't seem that way, but he did. I miss him so much. I wouldn't change anything, and I will be very happy when I see him again. I know he is still with me, and I will be okay."

"You're doing a lot better than I thought you would."

"He taught me well."

"Who? Daddy or God?"

"Both of them."

Taking a deep breath, my mother wiped her tears.

"Gina, you need to see that Alex is not the problem, you are."

The words stung like a bee as they entered my brain.

"Ouch, Mom! Just throw the punches."

"I'm sorry, honey." She patted my hand and gave me a hug.

"Gina. Yes, Alex is at fault, too for where the two of you are, but how you feel, you created. You're forty-five and almost half your life is over. Your children are becoming adults and soon will leave. Your body is changing, and so is your life. It's normal to feel the way you feel. I did, too, but it was different with my generation,

we just accepted getting older. We accepted the role. Your generation has more choices, so it's more confusing."

"I really don't know what I want. I am a little scared. I admit it. What if Alex and I can't handle it being just us again? What if the spark is really gone between us? We have become so distant to each other. We don't even talk too much anymore or spend time together doing things."

"Do you really believe that it's really over?"

"I don't know, ma. I just don't know. I want to feel butterflies again. I want him to kiss me passionately."

"Then seduce him."

"Ma, we're in church! Lower your voice," I said as the man behind us gave me a shocked look.

"Gina, if you want passion, then you need to create some friction. You are a woman."

"I sat there and slightly laughed because she was right. I didn't know what to say because nothing I could say would make sense. I did want passion. I wanted the sparks. Thinking it over in my mind, I realized that I really was pulling away from him because I was afraid of getting older. I was depressed about life changing, and I pulled away before he could reject me. So I made him reject me anyway. If I wanted passion from Alex, I needed to create it."

My mother looked at me and started to talk, "Don't be afraid to age. It's not that bad. It's not that great either, but the only alternative is to die young. Your next stage of life will be as wonderful as you choose to make it. And you know what? I bet Alex is a little scared, too."

"You really do?"

"Yes, I do. Your father went through things too as he approached fifty. He worked more, got grouchy at times. I didn't like him so much then. We had our own little journey, and we survived. We stuck together. All good relationships have these moments of uncertainty. They help us grow and change together. You need each other more now. You have a history together."

"I do still love him, Mom, and I am scared of getting old."

“I know you are. I am, too,” she said, and I smiled. “I can’t make that go away for you, honey. I wish I could, but I can’t. I also know you’re here for me, and I love you for being here, but don’t feel overburdened.” She sat back against the bench and continued to talk, “The last thing you need now is a dependent mother. I am a lot stronger than you think. My mother was left widowed with seven kids in her forties, and she survived. I have a lot to be thankful for, and I will survive, too. As a matter-of-fact, your father always said I needed to have more fun in my life. He said I was always too serious, so I decided to take his advice. I’m going on a cruise.”

“A cruise, when, where, with whom?”

“With people from the church. Widows, widowers, couples. A whole group. We’re going to Mexico. It’s in four weeks. I came here to tell your father.”

“You came here to tell Daddy?”

“Yeah, I felt that it was right to do. I mean, I don’t need a sign or anything like that, but he came here a lot and you know, I feel like he heard me.”

I sat there in silence. I didn’t know what to say. For the first time, I had nothing to say.

“You have nothing to say?” My mother asked. “This is a shocker. I’m shocked. You always have something to say. You always have an opinion.”

“Do you want me to say something, Ma?”

“Yeah, Gina, I do. I want you to say something.”

“Okay, Ma. I’ll say something.” I sat there, and I smiled. I didn’t know what to say. I was shocked. So all I said was have a good time.

My Mom started to laugh. “That’s all you have to say. Have a good time. Wow! It’s a big day when you don’t have an opinion.”

“Well, Ma . . . I don’t know what I’m doing, so I can’t tell you or anyone else what to do. It’s like I want to be fifteen again and do it all again. Sounds silly, doesn’t it. I mean, I don’t know if all my choices were right.”

“You can’t go back. No one can. You made choices. We all made choices. You need to figure out what you want now, and what you are willing to lose, Gina. Ah, your generation had too much confusion. Women had more choices than my generation, and you guys were told by television commercials and shows that you

could have it all." My mother started to laugh and squeezed my hand and continued to say, "You can't have it all, Gina! You can't take every road and buy every piece of candy in the candy store. You got to make a choice. And you have to choose what you want. What is right for you, and no one else. I should have told you that when you were younger. I feel bad about that."

"Don't feel bad, Ma," I said as I squeezed her hand.

"You are right, Ma. My generation had a lot of choices and yeah, maybe I did expect to have it all. And now, I know it's impossible. It's an illusion."

"The choices you made put you where you are now. You have a beautiful family. So maybe you didn't have a high-powered career or the spotlight, or even butterflies when you kiss him, but you and Alex have had a good life, and you have a whole life ahead of you if you two can get past this spot that you are in. Your dad and I went through it when you all left the house and started your lives. We called it a rut. Aye, it wasn't fun, and he'd agree with me if he were here. It did pass, and eventually, we were good again. And when it passed, we were both ready for the next stage of life. And now, I have to face this next stage of life alone. What can I do, but do it."

We both got quiet. We didn't speak. We just held hands, and I guess she was praying, too. I'm not sure. I didn't ask.

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I arrived home and the house was quiet. It was empty, and I felt lost. I started to feel really sad when suddenly, my cell phone went off, and I answered it.

"Gina?"

I let out a sigh and softly said, "Hi Alex."

"How are you?" He asked.

His voice sounded good as I answered him, "Umm . . . Okay, I guess. How 'bout you?"

“Truthfully, I’m miserable. I want to see you, and I want to talk. Really talk. This whole thing is ridiculous. We’re at a crossroads, and we need to make decisions. The kids are older, and starting their lives, and you and I don’t know how to make the change. We need to talk and make decisions about us. We can’t put it off anymore. Will you have dinner with me?”

It felt so good to hear his voice. “Yes,” I said.

“I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“I’ll be ready,” I said.

Hanging up the phone, I felt nervous inside. Even though I had known him for so long, I couldn’t determine the tone of his voice. Would this be good or bad tonight? I couldn’t control where it would go, and I realized that I had to just let it flow. His voice did sound good, and when I heard it over the phone, I admit that I felt like a schoolgirl again waiting for that call from the boy you liked. Rushing up the stairs to my room, I got ready.

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I stared at my reflection in the mirror. The little black dress still fit. Thank God, I thought. I looked good. I looked better than I had in years. I actually couldn’t remember the last time I had put so much care into my hair, make-up and outfit. The voice from the doorway startled me.

“Wow! Mom, you look hot.”

“I do?” I said as I turned around and saw my daughter Allie staring at me.

“Really, you think so?” I quickly asked.

“Yeah . . . umm . . . when did you get that dress?” She questioned me like an over protective mother.

“A couple of months ago. I saw it in the store, and I don’t know, I bought it thinking I might need it one day.”

“Are you going on a date?” She asked, and I noticed her voice suddenly becoming very solemn.

“I guess I am. It feels like a date.”

“Who is it? I mean, you and Dad are not divorced, yet and I just . . . I mean . . . “

“Allie, honey, relax. I’m going to dinner with your dad.”

“You are!” Her face lit up like a firecracker. “Oh, my gosh, Mom . . . this is great. I have to call Justin.”

“Your brother is at work. You can clue him in on everything when he gets home. Now don’t get so excited. I know that I love your dad, and I don’t want to lose him, but he called and just asked to talk, so I don’t know how he feels.”

“Mom, to just talk. In that dress?”

“Excuse me! What do you mean by that.”

“Hello, Mom. I’m not a child. I am seventeen soon to be eighteen and graduating high school. That doesn’t look like a ‘let’s talk’ dress,” she said with a smirk.

“Laughingly, I said, “You know, I almost forgot. You’re a woman.

“Yes, I am,” she said as she came into my room and sat on the edge of my bed. “I believe that Dad still loves you. He’s been so miserable over all of this. I mean he doesn’t know what you want. He doesn’t even understand why you’re so unhappy. Actually, Mom, Justin and I don’t know why you’re so unhappy either. I don’t mean about Grandpa’s death, but it’s been obvious that you haven’t been happy for a while, even before Grandpa got sick.”

The smile from my face faded, and I got pretty quiet. *Shit*, I thought. *I was that obvious. Wow, I feel really bad.*

Allie’s words jarred me from my thoughts. “I mean, Mom, come on . . . Dad is a great guy. He really is. I’m not just saying that because he’s my father. Besides, he doesn’t tell you what to do. You can do anything you want. Maybe you should start a new career or go back to school. Maybe you and Dad should date again. It might stir up all those feelings that are pretty buried right now.”

“They’re not totally buried,” I said with a smile. “That’s why I’m wearing this dress.” I embarrassed myself with my own words as I felt my cheeks get red.

“Yeah, I figured. That’s what I told Dad.”

“When?”

“Today. I had lunch with him. He doesn’t express it a lot, but he does love you.”

I started to blush more and felt the heat in my cheeks increase. “Are you taking psychology this year?” I asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“It shows.”

“Mom, you tell Justin and I to follow our passion. Well you need to also, but first you have to figure out what that is. Why are you so unhappy?”

Her question hit me like a slap on the face, and it stung because I didn’t know why. “I don’t know,” I finally said. “I really don’t know. I think it’s aging.”

“Aging? What do you mean?”

“Allie, my life has revolved around my family which is now different. I mean I have had a job, but not a career. I clean this house, but I don’t pick up after you guys anymore. And, well, I guess in my path of aging, I have become a bit distant to your dad during all of this, and now the distance is pretty wide.”

“Well, Mom a distance can become closer again if you let it. Besides, he’s your best friend. Aren’t we supposed to marry our best friends? At least that’s what Grandma told me. “

“Grandma? You mean my mother?”

“Yeah, Grandma’s been talking a lot lately since Grandpa died. I’m seeing them differently. I mean I know that they’re my grandparents, but they were once young and in love, too.”

I sat down on the bed next to her and gave her a hug. “You know, Grandma said pretty much the same thing to me. I guess she’s doing a lot better than I thought she would. She’s going on a cruise with her friends.”

“Wow! She really is. That’s great! Mom, Grandma will be fine. She really will. I don’t think that you’ll have to raise her now that Grandpa has died.”

“No, actually, she’s still raising me.”

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An hour later, I opened the front door and saw Alex for the first time in a while. He did look good. He handed me a single red rose just like he did on our first date many years earlier. I smiled and kissed him gingerly on the cheek. I was so nervous, and it felt good to be nervous. Those butterflies that I thought were long gone had returned.

“Hi,” I said while blushing.

“Hi, yourself.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Anywhere. I don’t care as long as I’m with you.”

Smiling with tears in my eyes, I nodded and whispered, “That sounds good to me.”

Suddenly, he grabbed me and held me tight. “You look fabulous in this dress,” he whispered in my ear.

I was shocked and pleasantly surprised. Again, I was speechless. Not really a character trait for me.

He kissed me passionately, and I kissed him back with as much intensity. His mouth felt warm and inviting and the goose bumps that it created traveled through my whole body. I felt myself melt in his arms. It was a kiss we hadn’t had in years.

“Where did that come from?” I asked breathlessly as we slightly parted.

“I should have done it more. I know that now. I know that at times I didn’t show the affection I should have shown you. I just got too comfortable, and I let the world get in the way of us.”

“Yeah, I did too.” I admitted. “Alex, we have things to work out.”

“Yes, we do, but we can’t work them out apart, Gina.”

“No, we can’t,” I said.

We kissed again, and it was nice—really nice.

“So . . .” He asked, “Where do you want to go?”

I stared into his eyes and said with a smile, "Anywhere, as long as I'm with you."