

Slivers of Light
By Belle A. DeCosta

Bethany clutched to the vision of his image as one would a ship's railing, desperately trying to keep her emotional boat from capsizing in this unforeseen storm. She looked out over the sea of black and hung on for dear life. So much black. Black suits, black dresses, black mascara smudges under teary eyes. Black, the color of death. *Dead, like Carson.* Like their dreams of retirement, so close and now gone. *Expired, like Carson.*

Bethany took a deep breath and replaced all thoughts with her husband's face. She started to descend the stairs, a grand sweeping staircase Carson had elegantly escorted their daughter down as a bride. Her breath caught at the remembered scene, and she stopped. *Don't think.* She again cleared her mind of all but Carson's reflection and walked into the sea of ebony.

The celebration of her deceased husband's life. Endless air kisses, hand grasping, eye dabbing, sincere yet stifling condolences. All the sorrowful glances and head shakes. After an eternity of treading water through the turbulent whitecaps of socialized grief, the last guests departed, and Bethany kicked off her heels and collapsed into a chair. Her three children, Roland, Charlotte, and Troy, hovered anxiously around, at the ready should she need anything. *What beautiful people we raised, Carson.* She accepted a brandy from her eldest, Roland, fondly touched her daughter Charlotte's belly swollen with child, then shooed them home to comfort their young families. Troy, her youngest, was most reluctant to leave, but she insisted. "I need to be alone," she said.

Once the caterers left and the housekeeper turned in, Bethany took her brandy and drifted into Carson's study. She opened the mahogany double doors and greedily inhaled the air infused with sandalwood cologne, polished wood, worn leather, old books, and the occasional forbidden cigar. The scent of her husband. She heard a mournful whine and found their coonhound Maddie behind the antique mahogany desk. Carson had found the abandoned pup eight years ago in the hospital parking lot, and the two had been constant companions ever since. "Come on, girl," Bethany coaxed, "Let's curl up on the couch and..." And what? Bethany hadn't a clue. How do you continue to breathe when half of you has vanished? Sensing her mistress's growing distress, Maddie padded over and dropped her head into Bethany's lap. Stroking the hound's silken fur, she found comfort in a kindred soul. "We're both untethered, girl, aren't we?"

Bethany lay her head back and closed her eyes. She couldn't remember a time without Carson. They grew up in South Boston in an Irish neighborhood of cops and firemen. Their parents were next-door neighbors and best friends; their fathers were Boston firefighters, and both mothers were at-home moms. Their block-long street dead-ended to an elementary school, and their church sat across the street at the other end. Until junior high, most neighborhood kids never left a four-block radius. A gaggle of kids hung out together, but Bethany and Carson's friendship was closer and unique. They were inseparable from when they were toddlers: even in elementary school when Carson declared girls had cooties and Bethany

thought boys were gross. The two never saw one another as boy and girl — they were just them. Both had their first date to the eighth-grade dance with others but spent most of the night hanging out together. Unable to understand why their dates got so angry, they decided the romance thing wasn't worth the trouble and steered clear of dating. Bethany smiled at the memory. *It never occurred to us we might be the romance thing.*

High school brought hormones and proms, and their mindset toward the opposite sex changed. Still, they never thought of each other that way; she was his best bud, and he was her bestie. Carson warned her of the players, and she taught him how to win over a girl. But courtships always ended in break-ups, and neither went steady for long. Occasionally they tried to figure out why but didn't dwell on it — each thought the other was the absolute best, so it must be the other party's issue. Everyone could plainly see jealousy over their closeness was always getting in the way, but the pair never saw it. They were buddies, childhood friends. The idea it was anything more never crossed their minds. Unbeknownst to them at the time, it was everything and then some.

They both were accepted to their college of choice, Bethany to Villanova and Carson to Georgetown. With the excitement of college and pending freedom, awareness didn't hit until that late August morning, saying goodbye. For the first time in their lives, they wouldn't wake up next door to each other in the morning. Bethany remembered feeling the ground shift under her feet at the realization: no Carson for a whole semester. *Is it any wonder the ground has completely given way at my permanent loss of him?* Choking back a sob, she recalled how he looked at her as the unthinkable sank in for him. At that moment, the light finally dawned on both. Carson bent down and kissed her, a kiss tender and heartfelt, shy yet possessive, and oh so right. They stared at one another in awe and adoration, then silently got into their cars and drove away. Neither dared to address it for fear they wouldn't leave. It would take them the entire semester to process the revelation.

*

The cocktail of grief and brandy suddenly hit hard, and Bethany barely made it upstairs to bed. The bed she and Carson had shared for so many years. Where children were conceived, comfort was found and given, birthday breakfasts served, and passion ignited. Now it was just her bed, empty and cold. She threw her clothes on a chair and crinkled her nose. The ensemble reeked of lilies, incense, and earth. *The smell of death.* Bethany shivered and vowed to throw the clothes away in the morning. She crawled under the quilt and braved the desolate darkness of sleep with the memory of their young love blooming fresh in her mind's eye.

The following morning, Bethany stirred, oblivious to the truth for one brief, glorious moment between sleep and wokeness. Then sorrow reignited the throb in her head, anguish gut-punched the air from her lungs, and heartbreak released the dam restraining her tears. She didn't fight back and succumbed to the despair and agony, letting it consume her, welcoming it, hoping it would render her useless. It didn't; it left her limp and ragged, but still able to drag herself into another day. *My new way to start the day.* She did the bare minimum for grooming and headed downstairs to emptiness.

Bethany poured a mug of coffee and sat down at the breakfast nook. *Alone*. She looked out over their perennial gardens and sweeping pastures lined with old stone walls. Having them authentically repaired and restored had cost a fortune but was worth every cent. Carson loved looking out over the land while he drank his first cup of coffee. “A beautiful vision to carry through the day,” he’d say. *Used to say but would no more*. She staved off the tears, blurring her view with memories of morning coffee shared in earlier times.

*

Christmas break confirmed what the kiss had intuited, and you couldn’t fit a piece of paper between them for six weeks. They met at the diner every morning for coffee, lingering so long they had to run to catch the bus to seasonal jobs. Dinner was at either parent’s house, followed by (if they were lucky) some alone time. Privacy was a tricky business with siblings that missed them and mothers that hovered. It usually meant taking a walk or, if one of them had a little extra cash for gas, a ride along Storrow Drive. Bethany smiled, remembering how they could barely keep their hands off one another, but since it was winter in New England and they both lived at home, having sex was a challenge. It usually happened in the backseat of one of their cars, fast and furious, fully clothed, and with pants around their ankles to beat the bitter cold. Carson used to joke his ass was frostbitten, so Bethany gave him a bun warmer for Christmas. They laughed ‘til they cried, and it sits on their kitchen counter to this day.

Both knew wasting the remainder of the year’s scholarship was not an option and were committed to their respective schools until June. They decided Carson would apply for transfer to Boston University for pre-med and Bethany to Boston College for pre-law. Bethany touched her ear, remembering the hours-long phone calls. *In hindsight, we probably spent more on long-distance phone bills than we saved on tuition*. It all worked out as planned, and that summer, they rented a third-floor walk-up in the Allston Brighton area of Boston, home to tenements full of college students. It was a closet-sized dump with little heat and only enough hot water for one shower---something they didn’t mind. Like the diner over break, they made a point to have the first cup of coffee each day together. It was instant coffee, powdered creamer, and stolen sugar packets from the diner, a far cry from the fresh ground Arabica bean brew she was savoring now. The view was fire escapes covered in pigeon droppings and trash piled up on the curb below, instead of gardens and land, but the quality company and conversation were the same, and she loved they’d carried the morning habit through the years.

*

Bethany sighed, brought her mug to the sink, and went in search of something to do. She’d cleared her court calendar for six weeks, knowing her focus would be elsewhere, if anywhere. As a family court judge, she ruled on children’s futures, a responsibility she took in earnest. Maddie brought over her leash and sat staring with her soulful hound dog eyes, providing her mistress a task. Carson took her for a run most mornings before making his rounds, a labor of love that now fell on Bethany. “Good idea, girl, the fresh air will do us both good.” It took the dog a block or two before she understood her mistress walked, not jog, but they soon settled into a compatible gait. Unfortunately, Bethany’s mind chose to travel down a desolate dark path instead of staying on the sunny walk Maddie was enjoying. She was a lawyer,

analytical by trade, and a judge who looked at the facts and achieved fair outcomes. But the harder she tried to make sense of Carson's death, the less clear it became and so unfair. Carson was a good man, father, husband, and son. He was a heart surgeon, for Chrissake. He ate right, exercised, and lived a healthy lifestyle. How is it they found him dead of a heart attack on the locker room floor of the Tennis Club? Bethany froze. It was the first time she'd let the horrible vision settle inside her. She started to run, trying to outpace the unfathomable scene in her mind. It worked. Arriving home on shaky legs, it took all her focus to fill her lungs with air.

*

Days turned into weeks, and Bethany unknowingly continued to replace unbearable loneliness and insurmountable sorrow with memories.

The first time the housekeeper changed the sheets, it hit her; Carson would never sleep on them. She lay in the crisp linen and revisited times of laughter and family pajama parties that left her smiling. Likewise, when the nights felt endless and the bed barren, Bethany would conjure up thoughts of lovemaking and long talks snuggled in Carson's protective arms, which offered her rest, if not sleep. Or she'd fondly remember the first days in the closet dump, out of the cramped backseat and onto an air mattress, able to explore each other's bodies and fully appreciate their physical connection.

Her morning coffee became a time to reflect on past conversations. In the small college dump, dreaming of the life that awaited them, loving the life they had. Solving the world's problems or quizzing each other before an exam. Giving pep talks when the grind of school and work threatened to overwhelm one of them. And in this magnificent home, sharing days of law and surgery, and later, their children. Always there for each other.

Bethany made a point to start concentrating on her surroundings during her and Maddie's walks instead of thinking. They lived on the border of Norwell and Scituate, MA, both affluent towns on Boston's South Shore. Under 30 miles from the city, they were a lifestyle away. Norwell offered stately homes restored to their previous grandeur, rolling pastures, and wealthy neighborhoods. Scituate was an upscale coastal town with an old charm feel. Being on the border offered her the best both had to give. She and Maddie walked beautiful treelined streets, admiring the immaculate properties with the scent of the sea in the air. The fresh air was a balm for her mind's tangled cobwebs and splintered heart. Sometimes, if the wind wasn't too bad, Bethany bundled up and walked the dog down to the beach.

On a particularly gray day, returning from one such walk, Bethany stopped to admire their home from the street. "It's quite magnificent, Maddie, isn't it?" Behind a half-acre of a pristine lawn, their historic, rambling farmhouse sat in all its splendor. Fully restored, the white home with oversized windows dressed in classic black shutters was embraced by a wraparound porch and accessorized with a front door of cranberry red. It was precisely what she'd envisioned when she first saw it all those years ago. The gray sky blackened, and driving sleet sent the pair scrambling for cover. Once tucked in with the fireplace lit and a cup of tea, Bethany continued to reminisce.

*

As a young couple, whenever they needed a short break, they'd ride to the South Shore to clear their minds before hitting the books again. Driving along scenic Rte.123 one afternoon, Bethany spotted the property and asked Carson to pull over. "That's where we're going to raise our children one day," she announced. Seeing nothing but a dilapidated, abandoned farmhouse, he laughed. "I'm serious, Carson; that will be our home." For Bethany, it was love at first sight; for Carson, it took a few more drives. *Like a hundred*, she thought and smiled wistfully. Eventually, she won him over, and dreams of restoring the place got them through the grueling pace of studying for boards, clerkship, and residency.

Looking back, she wondered what the college kids thought of the successful doctor and lawyer living on the third floor. But both were raised by practical working-class parents, so they decided to remain where they were until they paid down their student debt. It allowed them to put most of their lucrative salaries towards loans and start the next leg of their life's journey financially sound.

Bethany paid little attention to money; she had the career she'd always wanted and Carson by her side. So, when she came home late one evening to a candlelit takeout dinner on the coffee table, she feared she'd forgotten an important date. Carson handed her a gift wrap box containing an old fashion key and declared her the mistress of their new castle, such as it was.

Almost debt-free, homeowners, and careers on track, Bethany and Carson decided it was time to get married. They were wed in the church at the top of their childhood street, surrounded by life-long friends and neighbors and family members galore. Both members of large Irish Catholic families, there was no way it would be anything less than an event. The reception, planned by their mothers, was an elaborate affair, far beyond what the couple wanted. But seeing the joy it brought their parents was worth the concession. After the wedding, the newlyweds moved from the closet-sized dump and into a 2,800-square-foot money pit.

The original plan of doing some of the renovations themselves didn't last a year. The pair realized they were in over their heads between lack of time and zero skill. Bethany cringed at the memory of living in a construction zone for two years. Carson had joked the only way they survived it was the long hours they worked. But the end result was worth every cent spent and any inconvenience suffered. Through the years, they continued to add personal touches, making it their homestead.

Bethany looked around at the pieces of their life together, evident in pictures, décor, worn mementos, and the warm scent of home. She wandered through each room, viewing it anew through the different lenses of time: as a new bride, part of a carefree couple, a young mother, a saddened momma bird in an empty nest, a secure middle-aged woman, and now as a widow. Love was the one constant this beautiful space held dear and kept all those years. And Carson was the core of that love. That was his legacy. Death had taken Carson's physical being but not his presence. That lived on in these walls, her heart, her thoughts, their family, and her life. Bethany now understood Carson, a part of her soul since birth, would remain with her in their life-long memories and love. Death could not break an eternal bond.

The widow looked out the window and saw rays of light breaking through the dark sky. *Like the light of memories penetrates through the blackness of my grief*. Bethany knew her time of mourning was not over, her cracked existence far from repaired. But in this darkest of times, she now saw a glimmer of light

to guide and help heal her. Inspired, Bethany went to invite her children and grandchildren over for dinner. She was ready to start adding her own slivers of light.

Belle A. DeCosta's work includes her memoir, *Echoes in the Mirror*, a novel, *Treading Water* (awarded Finalist for Best First Novel by Next Generations Indie Book Awards 2022), and *The Heart of Addisen*, book two of the *Treading Water* series. She has been featured in previous ARIA Anthologies, and makes her home in East Providence.