

THE 12-FOOT TEEPEE

by Marilyn Armstrong

Prologue: Beginning at the End

Death always takes us by surprise. Even when you know someone is terminally ill, when the end comes, it's a shock.

Thus it was that in the darkest part of a winter night, with the temperature hovering just above zero and heavy snow expected, the phone rang. Of course I knew. I could feel it. Death was in the air.

Expected though the call was, it nonetheless hit me like a bludgeon. Forever. My father was dead. At age 90, he had passed over. I hoped he'd gone to a better place, but felt the odds were against it. There would be no reconciliation, no happy ending.

Edith, my father's lady friend of the last 5 years, was on the phone.

"Your father passed away during the night," she said. Her voice broke as she told me. "He went in his sleep," she added.

"A mitzvah," I said, reflexively. To die quietly in your sleep is generally considered a gift from God. My father had been suffering for almost a decade from ever-worsening congestive heart failure.

"He was a good man," Edith said, tearfully.

"Uh huh," I muttered, noncommittally. The good man she knew was not the man who raised me.

"When and where is the funeral?" I asked. Jews don't embalm and don't view remains. Not to put too fine point on it, we plant our deceased with deliberate haste. But missing the funeral doesn't mean you miss out. There's a whole week of sitting Shiva – the Jewish version of the wake – that offers family and friends plenty of opportunity to participate in ceremonial grieving. Interment is quick, what follows is plenty long enough to make up for it.

I hung up the phone and started planning. I'd have to find a flight to Florida first thing in the morning. Hopefully I could find a cheap one because I was, as ever, broke. Rationally, there wasn't any reason for me to go at all. For the last few years, my father and I had entirely ceased all forms of communication. Silence had engulfed our relationship. It was over between us.

Yet I had to go. Violence, sexual abuse, mental abuse was his legacy to me and my brother. Lucas was gone, so only I remained and I had to be there. I needed to remember. After performing this final ritual of respect for the man who gave me his DNA, I would close that door forever. His funeral would be a cleansing for me.

I decided to go alone. Me and dad, we had history and this was our final chapter.

"Are you sure that you are up to doing this alone?" Gabe questioned. "That's a lot of hauling through airports."

"I know," I said. "But I'm just going for the day. One small bag, taxi to the funeral, taxi back, and I'm home. I'll be tired, but I'll survive."

"I could come. I think I should be with you."

"No," I said. "I want to do this by myself."

"But why?" Gabe was puzzled.

"I don't really know why, but I have to do this on my own. Closure," I said, and I laughed. Closure has become a cliché.

The 12-Foot Teepee

“Closure,” Gabe echoed. “Okay, closure it is,” but he smiled too. A private joke between us.

“The only thing that could really mess up my plans is if I can’t get out of Logan before the storm hits. So I need to get moving. I’ll call you when I get there,” I promised. “And I’ll take you up on getting me to the airport and picking me up. If the weather socks me in, I’ll find a motel and stay over until I can get home, but they usually get Logan up and running pretty fast and I don’t think we’re getting that big a storm. Or at least that’s not what the weather guys are saying. At the moment.”

The following morning dawned grey and air smelled like snow. I packed my little bag, adding clean underwear, a night gown, my medications, and a change of clothing in case I had to stay overnight.

Gabe went off to gas up the car and take some cash out for me. While I waited for him, I went out onto the deck to watch the birds peck at the bread and seed we leave for them.

The birds had returned early and taken up residence in our woods. It’s a great place for birds, full of blackberries and dead trees full of yummy bugs. Winter had come very late and the confused birds had begun nesting early. Winter ambushed them and now they were hungry. Jays, titmice, woodpeckers, chickadees, cardinals all vied for the food we put out for them. The backyard was full of birds. Each time the blue jays came to grab a piece of bread, the little birds would scatter, wait, and then come back to peck at the seed.

I’d heard on the news that the groundhog didn’t see his shadow this year, so it’s supposed to be an early spring. I guess the birds heard it too because they were building nests and trying to raise their babies in the frozen woods. Despite the hardship, every birdie parent in that woods was doing its best to take care of the nestlings. I envied the baby birds.

My father’s funeral was a strange experience. For one thing, I was the only blood relative to attend. I didn’t, aside from Edith, recognize a single person.

“Alfred was a true gentleman,” intoned the rabbi. “Always ready with a joke, always gallant, preparing feasts for his friends even as his own debilitating illness progressed. He was,” the rabbi assured us, “Loved by all.”

“He charmed all those around him,” the rabbi continued, “And he will be greatly missed.”

Edith came to the podium and spoke of his kindness to his neighbors, his generosity, his warmth.

Who was this guy? It wasn’t anyone I recognized. The charming teller of jokes, the generous, warm-hearted neighbor ... this was not the Alf I knew. Did anyone other than me notice the lack of family attending? My mother’s family cordially loathed him. My brother had already passed on and his family – my cousins and their children – would as soon have had root canal than be anywhere near my father, living or dead.

No one asked me to speak, which was fine with me. What could I have said? Was this the forum to mention that the man was a child abuser and violent sexual predator? It might have made an interesting plot point in my story, but I demurred. Let the sleeping demons lie. God would provide the reckoning.

I found myself praying for my father’s soul. Perhaps, at the very last, he had actually repented of the things he’d done, of the horrors he’d perpetrated on his own offspring.

The 12-Foot Teepee

Maybe he would find his way to a heaven allocated to child molesters and abusers who at the last, repent.

After the service ended, I literally ran away. I'd gone as far as I could go. I'd come. I'd witnessed. The closure I'd sought eluded me and I departed with more questions than I'd arrived with. How could this charming guy that these strangers appeared to care about be the same brutal predator that turned my brother and my childhoods into Hell? Who was that guy?

Tidy conclusions elude us. Simple answers don't apply. Life is complex, chaotic and often wacky. It was time for me to go home and begin to live my life after Alf.

The 12-Foot Teepee

Oak Trees and Mosquitoes

Everybody needs a private place in which to dream. Although my granddaughter, Sarah, has a tiny bedroom of her own, it doesn't afford real privacy. She needed a place where she could give her dreams room to grow.

Our sprawling house shelters my daughter-in-law Joanne, my son Jake, Sarah, four, sometimes five dogs, plus me and my husband Gabe. There are many wonderful things about living as an extended family, but privacy tends to be scarce. I wanted to give Sarah space that was separate and special.

I so strongly believed that Sarah should have her own quiet, private place, that I began pricing playhouses. Expecting to find something that would cost a few hundred dollars, I was horrified at the thousands of dollars that playhouses actually cost. Despite some recent, modest improvement to our household economy, there was absolutely no way I could spend that kind of money on a non-essential item.

Next I considered getting Sarah a tent.

"It wouldn't work," Jake said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Tents aren't meant to stay up all summer."

"It says right here that these are."

"They aren't." Jake spoke with the sure finality of a man who knows.

"Look, it says right here ..."

"The ground isn't flat enough," Jake stated with authority.

"It doesn't say that it requires flat ground."

"I'm sure it does require flat ground no matter what it says. Besides, I don't want to use that much room in the yard for a tent. I like having open space."

Clearly I was not making progress. I gave up on the tent.

Looking back, I am sure a tent would have been just fine for Sarah and her friends. They would have a lot of fun with it. And even the most expensive tent would have cost a fraction of what we wound up spending on the teepee and it would have required enormously less sweat and angst. But a tent was not meant to be.

For some time I continued puzzling over a solution to this problem when suddenly I was hit by a brainstorm.

"A teepee!" I thought. "I'll get Sarah a teepee! That would be perfect!"

I am a great admirer of Native American culture. I do not believe that I was an American Indian in a former life. That would be an insult to Native Americans and hogwash to boot. I admire the culture on a spiritual and social level, not to mention loving their art, but I harbor no illusions about being Native American in this life or in any previous incarnation.

Quickly I Googled "children's teepee" and I discovered that I could get Sarah her very own child-size teepee for a mere \$360, including poles, delivered to our door. It was the ideal solution. I called The Great American Canvas company who were purveyors of teepees, including the children's teepee. I explained what I wanted to do with it, where I lived, and where this little teepee would be set up.

The kind lady with whom I spoke assured me the basic teepee would do the job "just fine", so I gave her a credit card number. She promised that, in short order, a 9-foot

The 12-Foot Teepee

children's teepee, including poles, would be winging its way to us and would arrive a mere 6 weeks later, approximately in mid-July. As it turned out, it did not arrive until well into August, but it also turned out to not really matter.

As with all projects, Murphy's Law instantly came into play. My personal version of Murphy's law says that all projects take, at the very least, twice as long and cost three times as much as initial estimates indicate.

This project kept growing. Before we could even think about putting up a teepee, even such a tiny one, we needed flat ground. Since we don't have any flat ground, we needed about 15 tons of clay fill to create a terrace. Building the terrace required a pile of antique railroad ties, each weighing more than 150 pounds. Those railroad ties would comprise the retaining wall that would hold the clay fill (sounds like the house that Jack built, doesn't it?) from which we'd create a place on which would stand the itty bitty 9-foot-tall peewee teepee.

For six hot sweaty summer weeks, Gabe and Jake moved wheel barrow load after wheel barrow load of clay from a huge, but ever-diminishing mountain of dirt that sat next to our driveway. One by one,

they rolled the heavily-laden wheelbarrows carefully down the steep drive and across the grassy backyard to the woods. In my wildest dreams, I never imagined that one diminutive teepee could require so gargantuan an effort.

When all the dirt that would need to be hauled had indeed been hauled and a place had been made so that Sarah's child-size teepee could at long last be raised, I said "I think I need to spend the winter in Sarah's teepee."

Everyone promptly declared that Grandma had gone around the bend.

Not that Grandma had ever been considered entirely sane, but usually at least one other member of our tribe thought I might have a point. This time, the entire family – rarely in agreement about anything – was in full concurrence about this. Grandma had lost it.

"I give you four hours," said Jake

"You'll freeze," said Sarah, staring at her computer and not even dignifying my statement by looking directly at me.

It's an honor being the family matriarch. You get a lot of respect and I live for that. Everyone agreed that I was out of my mind, which was oddly reassuring. My craziest ideas always turned out to be my best.

That evening, I told Gabe. "I think I need to spend the winter in the teepee," I said. Gabe looked up from the sports section.

"That sounds a bit extreme," he said.

"I know. Probably it is. But I need answers and I don't think I'm going to find them sitting here, watching television," I answered. I settled into the recliner. My brain felt itchy. Winter in a tiny teepee didn't sound very comfortable or cozy.

"How are you going to sleep out in the cold with that back of yours?"

"Well, in theory, I'm planning to sleep out there ... but probably I'll just spend a lot of time in it. I need to do some spiritual work and I don't think I can do it in a recliner in the living room."

My back is a huge problem and one of the main reasons I need the teepee. My doctors are telling me that my spine is in the final stages of disintegration. For most of my life it's been a mess. Stenosis, spondylosis, and degenerated discs, massive arthritis.

The 12-Foot Teepee

Now, without any apparent reason, it seems to have gotten much worse and entered the danger zone. To prevent its imminent collapse, they've recommended an ugly surgery. I'm terrified, almost paralyzed at what this surgery is will likely to do to me.

Nor is this the only issue I need to address. More than my physical problems are the dark, ugly shadows my father left on my soul. I have been through years of therapy and spent most of my life trying to touch the face of God to expunge this darkness from inside myself.

Each time that I think I have finally, at long last, exorcised the shadows left by the him, something happens ... a phone call, a dream, a family event ... and I know that he is still coiled like a snake, full of venom, waiting to strike at me.

Before my next birthday, I am determined that I will immunize myself against my father. I will make him powerless over me. I have been trying to do this for my entire life and never succeeded.

To reach this goal, I will have to reach deep inside myself and find answers to questions I've been afraid to even ask.

I need to travel to my personal spiritual mountaintop and I'll have to find the path myself. I know that I can't scale the Himalayas or even clamber up a minor foothill of the Appalachians. I'm far too decrepit for any kind of physical climbing, not to mention too cranky. But I've got to shake myself out of my spiritual lethargy and face the demons that have chased me since I was a child. I've run out of time. Tomorrow is here.

I therefore intend to spend as much time of the coming winter as the weather and my body allows in my granddaughter's teepee. If both of us are lucky, my granddaughter will spend some of this time with me and learn why people go to lonely and inhospitable places to find something that they cannot find anyplace else.