

JAMES VESCOVI

ENOUGH

She said it was *enough*, but she was dying, what did she know? Her cancer came on quickly. She rebelled, denied, and then accepted it. Toward the end, she went peacefully and told me that my suffering after her death would be eased if I saw things as she did.

Mary Ellen and I were married for twenty-nine years. We'd been filled with such idealism: a honeymoon in Costa Rica; a cozy starter home with a backyard hammock; and three children, all girls, who arrived in the first five years. Despite loads of dirty diapers, slim paychecks, and a sex life dulled by exhaustion, we maintained a dream of a happy marriage for as long as we could.

After the first ten years, I finally was brave enough to admit to myself that things were not right. I felt no fire for my wife, not even a tiny flame. The marriage was like some leftover in the fridge, which you'd rather discard than reheat. She must have felt the same because my birthday presents from her could have been picked out by a stranger. When the girls were away at summer camp, and Mary Ellen and I had the house to ourselves, she worked alone in her garden, while I tinkered in the basement or read in the den.

When I told her how I felt, she didn't reciprocate. Instead, she tried to prop the marriage up by being more attentive and more available, in and out of the bedroom. But she couldn't keep it up for long and eventually she made her own feelings known. We switched roles, and I became the savior. In the end, we realized we were sinking together. We became angry. With children at stake, a standoff developed: Which one of us would quit first?

Neither of us did, and life continued. I was vice president of a chain of regional grocery stores, and Mary Ellen was a housewife and part-time volunteer at a home for battered women. We took the kids on vacations to Yosemite and New Orleans; we dined out with a coterie of friends; and the girls were doing well in school and in sports. Our middle daughter was a state

champion in the high jump. As they became teenagers, and Mary Ellen had more time on her hands, she took evening classes to get a master's degree in Spanish literature so that she could teach junior college students, a longtime dream of hers. Everything was fine, except for us.

There was no adultery or violence—no meteor strike from a dark past secret whose impact sent up a cloud of dust and choked us off. There was no animosity between us caused by radically different political views or disgusting personal habits. We simply stopped caring about one another. Worse, neither of us could recall—I hadn't a damn clue—what had brought us together as lovers in the first place. That precious, barely invisible thing a couple possesses on their wedding day, whose potential is bigger and better than both of them together—to me it was as mysterious and ungraspable as a quantum particle.

Then, a flash of hope! In our eighteenth year of marriage, Mary Ellen and I came simultaneously to the same realization: If we could just hold on until the girls entered college, bide our time in this becalmed sea, we might be able to resuscitate our relationship. The stress of raising children would subside, and we would have the time and resources to get reacquainted and to heal. We would be in our late forties, which was years away from coronary malaise and the first signs of Alzheimer's. Mary Ellen and I discussed it with a marriage counselor, who encouraged us to hold on. Mary Ellen saw it as a flower of the agave family, which needs decades before it first blooms.

When our youngest went away to college—literally, the day we dropped her off at Denison—Mary Ellen and I were like teenagers who had a weekend to themselves. We were giddy. We made love at odd hours and places. We made last-minute trips to lakeside inns. We consumed expensive wines by candlelight. I surprised her with tickets to Madrid. She brought out old dresses that she asked me to tear off her.

At first, we were too tense to feel joy. We seemed suspended in air, waiting for our feet to alight on new ground. We held our breath to see if the dark cloud hanging above us for so long would lift. Were we strong enough to will it away? Could we count on a plain old-fashioned miracle?

We worked hard at it. We tried to love and even to like each other. I planted bulbs in the garden. We read McCullough's *John Adams* together. But familiar feelings resurfaced: indolence, passivity, fatigue. Neither of us was much interested in the thoughts of the other, let alone dreams and aspirations. There was no love; there was no hate. We were tuned to a wavelength of