

Lead on, Angel of Hope

Spiritual/Inspirational

We had a civil, mostly friendly, divorce. Our relationship became contentious a few years afterwards – growing pains, doncha know, plus at least one crazy girlfriend on his part (isn't that always the way, I'm told) – but as we split after a decade plus we worked hard to be decent, patient, even supportive to one other. If we'd worked this hard on the marriage, I joked at the time, we wouldn't be deciding who got the Pier 1 dishes. It was a brutal barrage of emotions that we tiptoed across like stepping stones over a waterfall, laughing and holding hands and pretending we weren't inches from a painful one-way trip over the edge. We pretended we could do this with ease and aplomb and unlike almost every divorcing couple in the known world, we were sure we could do it without eruptions of messiness like feelings or heaven forbid, unresolved issues. Fear will bring out the shadow side in any situation and we pushed back hard at the shadow. Even so, I was shaking in my shoes the day I signed the divorce papers. I fled the city within 24 hours and drove south to the beachiest beach I could find. I needed to gather my wits and rearrange what was left of my world. There is no better place for that than where the ocean meets the land, as every seeker of Beach Therapy knows. I gave my ex the house in the split and I had hurriedly stuck my (now *only* “my”) belongings into storage for a two weeks, planning to come back tanned, revitalized and ready to re-sort and re-settle. I had a small house on the Gulf Coast and a back up plan. I knew life would be good once I got over the thick sadness that fogging emotional acuity. Divorce is hard, but people survive. So it was with a hopeful heart that I drove south that day after the visit to the lawyer's office. I made it to the ocean mostly intact and jumped in but in less than two weeks I went through Hurricane Katrina

Lead On, Angel of Hope

and lost everything I thought I was starting over with, including, it later turned out, my mother. She lived in that house on the Gulf Coast and was injured at a local storm shelter as the wind blew and the water rose when they had to move everyone for fear the building was coming apart. She never recovered. She died before the 2nd anniversary of the hurricane, another Katrina casualty after the fact. A natural disaster and my mother's death on top of the demise of my marriage was like an Easter chick going a few rounds with Mike Tyson. I didn't stand a chance.

Making the hurt sharper, I really missed my ex's mom terribly. She had been an exemplary Mother in Law. It's hard to explain the general sunny-ness that is "Mother Helen" (as she often referred to herself when leaving a message on our home phone) except to say she's a practical and smiling soul, kind, fair, and intelligent. In 16 years I never heard her drop a dirty word (I can't go 16 hours without swearing, how does she do this?) and even on days where a normal human would consider resigning from society, she was nice to everyone and philosophically patient. Helen is both honest and unfailingly positive, a combo that's hard to beat. Besides my ex she had two daughters and another son, all very distinct personalities that I enjoyed a lot. If leaving my husband was hard then leaving the rest of his family was devastating. I'd waited my whole life for a family like that. I couldn't believe I was divorcing them. At the lawyer's offices I thought about asking for a "keep the family" clause but I knew there was no such emotional safety net. Silently I seethed at my ex for getting custody of his DNA and felt somehow cheated that I couldn't take them with me and leave him the dishes from Pier 1.

Lead On, Angel of Hope

As I was taking my leave, Helen, characteristically, reached out. She gave me a gift; a Susan Lordi designed angel sculpture. These simple figures are representational, feminine, with long hair but no specific facial features. This angel held a lantern in front of her. I looked at the box and saw she was named “The Angel of Hope”. I knew Helen well enough to know she wished me well. “Thank you for being so nice to me,” I said to her once, before I left. “Thank you for making my son happy.” She replied.

I carried my gifted angel with me as I left the city that day, looked at her often after I went through Katrina and then placed her on the dash of a lumbering vintage RV that I eventually purchased after the storm. I was bereft and wanting nothing so much as to get out of the devastation of my former existence. I was hoping to drive forward into a brand new life. I was traveling pretty light by this time - clothes, two dogs, a handsome Flamenco dancer and my Angel of Hope. Sometimes I would stare at her featureless face and feel blank myself. I would touch her. She felt solid. I didn't.

Some nights I would stare at her until my eyes closed into uneasy sleep. One night I asked her, “Why? Please tell me.” She didn't answer, of course. She just held out her lantern. “Don't your arms ever get tired?” I asked. She just held out her lantern. “Tell me what to do,” I begged another time.

Lead On, Angel of Hope

I discovered my angel was waterproof. Sometimes I would wail like a wounded child over a pile of losses that I just couldn't seem to bear. Tears would fall on her head and run down her sides like raindrops on their way to the ocean. I'd look from her blank face into the mirror at another blank face, this one my own. These were days that weren't even like days, but like dirges. Hope floats but grief sinks.

.As the landscapes changed around me I would leave my tears in one locale and drive to another. The Florida sun kept me from wilting into misery. The high desert of New Mexico lifted my heart. The lush Tennessee Mountains hid me until I was ready to look other people in the face and answer "Good. And you?" when they asked how I was doing.

As the years passed, one into two into three, I looked at my angel and took note, yet again, that she was steadfast with that lantern. I realized that there are those who shine a light ahead of us so we can find our way through our darkest hours, or in my case, years. I put her on the dashboard and faced her toward the highway as I drove from place to place, imagining that she held some superior map for my future, one I couldn't read yet. She provided comfort as I stumbled into my new life. She came to represent the future, yet was a gift from a treasured part of my past, a past I wasn't completely ready to let go.

Rolling on, no home except one with a drivers seat, I finally realized I needed to make it a place for growth, not just a place I was, as I suspected, simply hiding in and licking my wounds. It was time to make the RV into a real home and less of an outdated-looking rolling hotel room.

Lead On, Angel of Hope

The angel of hope became a beacon, and I worked outward from her. We covered the ugly beige walls in the bedroom with bamboo creating a peaceful place to rest. Clean bright hardwood floors replaced knobby carpet. Fresh flowers placed on an end table (really the steering wheel turned up with a colorful glass cutting board acting as the top) invoked brighter thoughts of spring. A cactus garden on the dash brought new and spiky life into my 29-foot world. As the caravan got updated my attitude got uplifted. The tiny bathroom was painted a soft lime and light filtered in from a skylight. Finally, I needed a place to write. My flamenco dancer, a Native American raised in New Mexico and no stranger to practical matters, turned out to be very handy and innovative. He fashioned a proper wooden desk using the dashboard as a base. It had a gliding top with enough room for a lamp, a printer, files, my laptop, pencil holder, and of course, my Angel of Hope. By now we were fast friends, the angel and I.

Eventually, without really knowing it until almost the last minute, I made a gigantic loop around America and my angel and I rolled back into Atlanta, where we arrived, four years to the day I had left for what I thought was a two week visit to the beach. The dancer and I, now married, moved into a house with our 16 year old Wolf mix, Tumbleweed, and Boomerang, an abandoned dog we had picked up when hiking in the mountains. A cat we named Gomez who had sauntered into our lives in an RV park in Alabama completed our nuclear family. Eventually we added six chickens, all named after women I knew, except for Dixie Licklighter, who was named after a person a friend knew. That name was too delicious to pass up. I pulled things out of storage as we made a home out of an old four-room farmhouse with some land attached. I moved the angel

Lead On, Angel of Hope

around the house until I finally settled on putting her near a sunny back window nestled among plants and colored glass. Still holding fast to her lantern, she also had acquired a found feather that was clipped to her wings and she held a scrap of paper on which I wrote “Alis volat proiis”, Latin for “She flies with her own wings.” She now represented a future dawning, a journey taken, a path cleared, a heart made stronger by breaking.

Not long after I returned, I got birthday card from Helen and John, my former father in law. “New Beginnings,” it read, “happen all the time.” I held it happily to my chest and silently thanked the universe for people like these people. Feeling a bit shy about being back again and unsure of my place in my former world, I called her a few months later when I’d gotten a heads up on Facebook from my nieces that she was ill. She’d been diagnosed with breast cancer. Sounding strong and sure, she replied “Oh yes!” when I told her she would be fine, but still I dropped my head into my hands and sobbed after the call ended and then cussed a blue streak that my father, a veteran military man who had died 11 years earlier, probably heard in heaven. Cancer happens to the nicest people, I noticed, but I felt sure Helen probably hadn’t yet and might never, cuss at her diagnosis like I did. She will deal with it, straightforward and practical as ever, with grace and surely some humor. And yes, she will probably be fine, after some hell of treatment, and she will still shine brightly, because that’s what Helen does. As I was thinking this, an idea popped into my head. I fired up my laptop and went to a search engine. In it I typed, “Where can I buy an Angel of Hope figurine?”