

The Jubilation Journey:
Melanie Graham
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Elizabeth was tired, very tired. She was also sick to death of being tired. Her mind still raced in fits and starts but her body was a seldom and reluctant follower. She felt old and frumpy. An appalling thought at only 51. It had taken days to get all these boxes of old papers up to this wonderful room. She opened her eyes briefly from where she lay on the couch and looked about. She loved this old stone house, her grandmother's house, but most of all, she loved this room. As a child she'd called it Granny's making room. It was a magic place where her grandmother produced wonderful sewing projects, delicate watercolors of flowers and fairies, and the most incredible stories. That was a long time ago though, and strangers had lived in the house for almost twenty years. It had taken her almost as long, but last year, when the place came on the market, she was ready, and now it was hers. A hollow victory.

She sighed, eased to her feet and stretched, wincing as the damaged muscles under her left arm pulled. She moved to the window to stare out into the dark night. She'd laid a fire and a chilled bottle of white wine waited unopened by her grandmother's last crystal wineglass. She could barely hear the ocean over the wind and rain, and the clatter and creak of the bare branches of the old oak. It all seemed so unreal, so ridiculous. Cruel irony too. After an active lifetime of healthy living and eating she'd been stunned, months ago, to find she had cancer. Invasive breast cancer. Small, early, slow growing, but cancer. A centimeter of malignancy had invaded her body and ripped her life apart.

She remembered those first thoughts after the diagnosis, before surgery, when she'd looked at her sagging but innocent breast. She'd felt a strange tenderness and pity. This part of her had worked so hard, and done so well. Her healthy teenaged children were a living testament to the poor breast's efforts. Now, however, it was to be hacked at and blasted with radiation, all to defeat a centimeter of malignancy. Her mother was devastated but wonderful in her patience and understanding. Friends, too, had, been supportive but when she'd turned to her children they'd gotten frightened, then angry and retreated or become demanding. Her lover of the past years had been overwhelmed and simply withdrawn. It was all too much to take. She sent the children to stay with their father, unplugged the phone and locked the world out. The self-imposed isolation proved to be a blessed relief. She retreated even more and made plans to take stock of her life, to purge what was superfluous and prepare for a fresh start once she'd recovered. She'd expected to heal as rapidly as she had from any previous illness or surgery, but had instead gotten sicker. The doctor had said it was normal, it would pass. Not fast enough.

She turned back to the room and wearily surveyed the open boxes. "Right" she muttered to herself "some success story this has turned out to be." A sound from down the hall caught her attention before she could sit down again. Running water. Great. Now she would have to find a plumber. She made her way out the door and down the hall to the bathroom. She didn't remember closing the door and the light appeared to be on. She must really be losing it, she thought, to leave the water running and the light on. She

shook her head as she opened the door then froze, stunned by what she saw. The bathroom was gone. In its place was a familiar back yard, this back yard, on a sunny summer afternoon. A little girl in a skirted green swimsuit was happily filling a wading pool. This was impossible. She closed the door and leaned against the wall of the darkened hallway. She wasn't on medication, so she must have really fried her brain. She could still hear the water running though, so with a deep breath she opened the door again and peered in. The little girl put the hose in the pool and paddled over to the faucet on the side of the house. She turned off the water, looked up at Elizabeth and frowned. "Hello" she said, "why aren't they there yet?" and Elizabeth remembered.

She'd been three and visiting her grandmother for the summer. They'd invented this lovely game on that perfect sunny day. Granny had made all these little paper boats and asked Elizabeth to make a wish for each one. They'd written each wish on a boat and then set them afloat to sail into tomorrow where they could all come true. There, beside the wading pool, the wading pool that shouldn't be in the bathroom at all, were all the little paper boats. With shaking hands she began to close the door again. This couldn't be happening. Before the door could close completely the little girl, the three-year-old Elizabeth called out in anger "You promised me and Granny they would all get there! You promised!"

She had to sit down, had to open the wine bottle and start the fire, just as she'd planned. Had to reconnect with what was real. There was no more sound from the bathroom and the light was out behind the closed door. All she could hear as she returned down the hall, was her own racing heartbeat, her rapid breathing and the wind and rain hammering at the roof and windows. The dark of the hallway was soothing, but the gentle, flickering light of the fireplace in the making room called to her. She paused in some confusion in the doorway. She hadn't lit the fire yet, but it was burning brightly. She shook her head, closed her eyes tight for a moment then opened them and entered the room. Nope. This was all wrong. Plaster walls had turned to stone, and the sofa and coffee table replaced by rock and furs. A scrawny old woman in a white, homespun, robe sat on the floor by the fire, sipping from an earthenware cup. A second cup stood by a clay jug. The crone looked up from the fire. Dark beady eyes scrutinized her from a frame of brown wrinkles and shaggy white hair. "Sit down," she gestured to the furs, "you look as though you could use a drink."

Elizabeth was at a loss. There was no place to escape to, especially if this was all taking place in her own mind. Must be dreaming. She shook herself to wake up, then smacked herself.

"Now that's stupid" the crone cackled, shaking her head and smirking. "If this is a dream, you may as well work through it till you wake up. If it's not, you can't really figure it out if you run away from it now can you? Sit down!"

She sat as the crone poured her cup full.

"Drink!"

She sipped. It was still white wine, still chilled. Well, there was some consistency, anyway.

“Who are you and where are we?” she stammered an opening.

The crone waited a while and watched Elizabeth before answering. “Doesn’t matter who I am. You know me. More important, though, I know you. As for where we are, we’re here, now, and wherever that is, well, that doesn’t matter either. You met the child?”

Elizabeth nodded mutely then sipped more wine.

“And what did you tell her?” the crone challenged.

“Oh, ah, nothing.” Time for more wine.

“Why not? She’s waited long enough!”

“For what? Isn’t she me? How could she wait for me if she’s me? What did I promise her? All I can remember is Granny and me floating all these little boats with wishes written on them and me believing, I guess, that they really would all come true if they made it across the pool.” and I’m babbling to shadows like a demented fool she thought to herself.

“Hah!” the crone snorted as she turned to stir the fire, “I’m no shadow but you are certainly a fool.” She looked back to Elizabeth. “Can you remember those wishes? Can you remember when you let them all go, one after another?” She turned back to the fire in disgust and Elizabeth followed her gaze.

As she watched the flames she thought back and tried to remember. They seemed such silly wishes now, when she first recalled them. Sad, though, to remember, even vaguely, how very much she’d believed in them. How simple and innocent they’d been. To be a teacher, to be a good mummy, to sing, tell stories, laugh and make people happy, to be happy.

“It’s not the wishes you believed in child,” the crone murmured, “it was you. That was before you needed other people to believe in you. Before you let that need make your choices for you. Remember?”

And Elizabeth began to remember. The crone prodded and nudged her memories throughout the evening. It was like a night of wandering through the old house to find doors where none had been and forgotten rooms full of abandoned memories. Dreams forsaken, like the three year old standing by the wading pool. She’d made so many choices that took her away from herself. Choosing friends she didn’t really like so that she wouldn’t be left out. Choosing courses at school, not because they interested her but because they might make her father proud of her. Choosing to try to be strong and

capable, a responsible adult when she was still a child, because it would make her mother feel safe and happy when her father was away. Choosing a career she hated because it was the one her father wanted for her, the one he believed would bring her the security of success.

Then there were all the angry, spiteful choices. The choice of a husband that would guarantee her father's anger. Leaving school because it would make her father angry. Moving as far away as possible because it would hurt her father. So many choices, unconsciously made, and all too often for the wrong reasons. Some of them good choices, few of them really bad, but so very few of them her own choices. Choices for her parents, for her friends, for her husband, for her children, but nothing for the little girl waiting beside the wading pool.

The questioning and the remembering eventually eased up then ended. Elizabeth stared into the dying fire, empty. She was a fraud. She'd lost herself somewhere and had no idea how to get back. The boxes of papers around her were full of someone else's memories, someone else's records and victories.

"Come child," the crone came to sit beside Elizabeth and put her arm around her shoulders, "you're too hard on yourself. Think of what you've learned through all your choices. The skills, the insights, the depth of understanding, the strengths, they're all valid and hard won. These are significant tools. You built them. Don't trivialize that. Think, instead, of how you can best use them. Go back to those first simple dreams and wishes. Re-examine them from the perspective of all that you've done and learned. Let the child guide you. Look in your heart and remember who you are, who you really meant to become. You have the tools, the strength and even the wisdom to make those dreams come true now."

Elizabeth began to cry quietly, for what seemed the first time in years. She rested her head on the old woman's bony shoulder, arms around her waist, closed her eyes and let the gentle tears come. The two rocked together softly, the crone humming, as the storm began to ease up and the fire die down. Dawn was not far off.

Elizabeth awoke when the sun was well up. The heavy rain and wind had given way to a beautiful, crisp sunny morning. She must have fallen asleep on the couch before she'd even begun to sort the boxes of papers. Oh well. She felt more rested than she had in months, though, so she didn't really care. She closed her eyes again, rubbed them, and smiled to herself. What a wild dream. Did she maybe drink a little too much wine? She couldn't even remember opening the bottle, much less lighting the fire. She stretched, careful with that left arm again, ran a hand through her hair and sat up. Her mouth tasted disgusting. She looked around and began to assess the work of sorting that lay ahead. Funny. The boxes seemed to have moved. She got up to look through the nearest box, but it was empty. Puzzled, she tossed it aside to check another. Each box was as empty as the one before it. Everything was gone! Financial papers, old records, letters and forgotten phone numbers, all gone! She looked to the fireplace and all that was left of the fire she'd laid was a mound of white ash. It's then that she noticed the wine bottle. She'd

never even opened it, but it was empty. Still sealed, but empty. Beside the bottle stood two of her grandmother's crystal wineglasses. Last night there had been only one, the last one. Each glass had a sticky trickle of wine at the bottom and lip smudges around the edge. She stared for a moment then slowly smiled. Today she would make paper boats.