# THE ART OF SELF-GIVING LOVE

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# CHAPTER 1

## HUBERT'S PASSION

Hubert stepped out of the darkness of the cow barn, squinting in the bright sunlight. He took off his cap, ran his hand back through his hair, and then put the cap back on, giving it a little pull to snug it up. He wandered over to the wooden fence on the south side of the yard, leaned on it, and scanned the horizon. His eye fell on the point south of the hay field where the tree line met the meadow, one of his favorite spots on the farm. He had wanted to build the farm house down there, next to the grove of poplars, overlooking the small sliver of lake that bends its way southward. That lake, often layered in morning fog, had always been beautiful to Hubert. But instead, the farmhouse stood on a hill, west of the barn. He had yielded to conventional wisdom and family pressure. Beautiful or not, it wasn't considered smart to build on lowland where rushing spring water could flood you out.

Yielding was something that Hubert had grown used to over the course of his lifetime. He had learned what it means to "be the big one" even as a kid growing up on this farm. He was the oldest, the oldest son that is, and he was expected to be a leader. He was the one who made peace among the siblings; he helped the younger ones succeed; he pushed them off to college and non-farm lifestyles. But he, of course, was expected to stay. There would be no adventures of that kind for him. He would come home, get married, and settle down for life on this land.

Standing in the bright sunlight this afternoon, he was happy with his life. There had been a time when he longed for

something else, but he'd made his peace with those ideas many years ago. He was here, and he was staying.

A cloud passed over the sun just then and a bit of spring chill made him shiver. He waited for the shadow line of the cloud to move through the yard, slowly darkening everything in its path.

Then he shifted the foot he was resting on the lowest rail of the fence and turned his head to the right, looking west toward the house. He could see a figure in the window, his wife. She looked out into the yard but Hubert knew she wasn't sure what she was seeing.

He waved to her in the window; she didn't respond. Pulling out of his thoughts, he walked up toward the house, and as he did, he saw her retreat into an interior room, away from the window. Time was, she would have had that door opened wide to him. She would have most likely been out on that fence line with him, sharing that view and dreaming about their future. Mary Ann was a dreamer. She'd been the English literature teacher in the local school and encouraged her students to imagine the lives of the characters in the novels she taught. She herself dreamed of wandering through Hardy country in England's southwest, or poking around in Dickens' London. She dreamed of big things for her children, too. She encouraged them to reach high, to go after their dreams.

And she and Hubert dreamed together. They had plans, these two did, plans to travel, to move out of farming and into another line of work. But eight children, a herd of dairy cattle, and 34 years had put their plans on hold. When they bought the farm from Hubert's folks, they both knew they were in for the long haul. By that time, they already had three kids; more would come. And dairy cows don't milk themselves; they have a way of keeping their owners down on the farm, twice a day, seven days a week.

Still, they did dream. On Sunday afternoons during the winter in the big farm house, they would shut the kitchen doors and spend hours in there together. The kids, playing in the other rooms with their tinker toys and paper dolls, could hear the mumble of their talking, but mainly they could hear them making candy and caramel popcorn. These Sunday moments were important to Hubert and Mary Ann. Here they traded dreams and schemes of times to come. They wanted to own a candy shop someday. There were trips they would take. Places they would see. The house they would build to grow old in together. Their Sunday kitchen chats kept those dreams alive.

Hubert pushed open the door to the porch and, as he usually did, he hollered in his greeting, "Hi, Mannie. It's just me, Hubert." He'd called her Mannie ever since they met and married in 1934. A sweet and private nickname for her, a contraction of Mary Ann. He didn't like Mary and she didn't like Annie, so they landed accidentally on Mannie and it stuck. "Hi, Mannie," he yelled again. But she was hiding.

He knew she would be frightened, so he gently and quietly moved toward the room where he thought she would be. "It's really just me, Hubert, the man of your dreams." He always tried to keep a lilt in his voice, a lightness and humor, even when nothing felt funny.

"What do you want?" she demanded. "I don't know you. Just go away and leave us alone."

"Oh, honey," he tried again, "come on, it's just me." He went through this ritual every time he came into the house. He tried so hard to keep his voice from breaking, to keep himself from being irritated with her. He knew she was not her real self any longer, that none of this was her fault in any way, so he tried very hard to remain positive.

He didn't always succeed. Especially in the early years of

her decline, he blamed her for being forgetful or paranoid. He scolded her then for asking the same questions over and over, for losing things, or for letting the house get dirty and unkempt. Later, of course, he regretted all that. He wanted to reverse the clock and take it all back. He did love her tenderly and now it was possible he might never be able to tell her again in a way she could understand.

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As soon as he could do it without scaring her more, he put his hand on her shoulder and neck, just beneath her hair line, and gently massaged her. She softened. His touch seemed to reach her yet. He knew that, in time, even this would not work, but for now, he drew her in a little with this kindness. And he talked. It was hard work for him, but he knew his voice would help. "Looks like Whitey's going to have her litter any day," he told her. "She's as big as a hog can get. I'm thinking it might be ten piglets."

She had a vacant look in her eye. She seemed to have no idea who Whitey was. "There was someone looking in the window just now," she said. "I don't know what those people want. Why can't they just leave us alone?" He soothed her with his hand, but he could smell that it was time to help her clean up after an accident. Urine, he thought, but nothing more.

"Come on, honey," he said. "Time for our bath. Come on now. It won't take but five minutes and then we can watch some TV." What he wanted more than anything in the world was to mix her up a highball and pour himself a brandy, to

sit together on the porch and talk about the kids, the grandchildren, the farm, and their plans. But those days were pretty much over. The doctors had told him she could no longer have that cocktail, but he knew very well where her condition was headed, and sometimes he broke the rules. Life is short, he thought. Why suffer more than you have to?

But now it was time to get that diaper changed and help her clean up. She went with him obediently to the bathroom where he kept all the supplies for this. He always turned on the water in the tub first. The sound of the running water kept her focused on this task. Then he loosened the snaps and dropped her pants to the floor; she stepped out of them. Next the diaper. These weren't disposable diapers with Velcro fasteners but cotton ones that needed to be pinned at the waist. He used baby safety pins with big plastic heads.

To him, she was still beautiful. And as the diaper came off, he reached quickly for the warm rag he used to wipe her clean. Each time he did this, he felt himself stir in his own loins. He loved her so much and missed the romance as much as everything else. But he knew he could never approach her again. So he changed her diaper, cleaned her up, and longed for more. He had always said to himself that, when she resisted him doing this for her, he would have to hire a nurse.

There were days when they went through this ritual and it was not so sweet. Often, while he was washing her gently, she would be accusing him of holding her against her will in the house and keeping her captive. Sometimes she would demand to know who he thought he was that he would be doing these things to her. Once, while he was away from the farm on an errand, she locked the farmhouse doors in fear and (as he reconstructed it later) walked into the dining room and looked into the big mirror over the buffet where she was confronted by her own image which she did not recognize. In what must

have been a moment of great fear and panic and suffering on her part, she beat the mirror to shards with a kitchen spoon. He found her later, sitting in the splintered glass, arms bleeding, weeping, and lost. On that day, the diaper had more in it than urine.

But today was one of the good days. On the way back down the hallway now he made this offer: "Mannie, how about a sloe gin fizz tonight? Would you like that?"

"Oh, I would," she purred back, almost normal. "I would." A sloe gin fizz it was, but with just a drop of the gin. He had his brandy. They sat together, looking out over the farmyard, quietly taking in their lives, watching the sun reflect off the barn until the last gleam became a shadow. Sitting together was what they did most of the time now. Real conversation was not possible any longer. But in these moments, Hubert still relished her presence, and he turned it into a sort of prayer for himself.

Hubert didn't do much talking with God; he didn't dare ask for much, not because he feared God would not answer but because he had not been trained to speak so boldly to God. He believed that God could read what was in his heart, so when he prayed, Hubert mostly listened. He walked quietly through the fields and hills of the farm. He sat silently next to Mannie. Or he dug out his rosary and fiddled through the beads and prayers, allowing his mind and heart to just be idle. It wasn't complicated or theological. It wasn't even always conscious. He just turned his heart toward God and let the rest happen.

God, he often thought, was there with him, but there was nothing God could or would do to reverse or stop the progress of Mannie's disease. He often wondered if God felt as sad as he did to be losing her.

Now sitting next to Mannie on the porch, Hubert felt a wave of that sadness wash over him. He was so lonely for her

companionship, the way they tussled with each other when they talked, the connection between their hearts. He could not imagine life apart from her, and yet she was slowly leaving him. She was drifting into an abyss and, sadly, taking her heart with her. He knew or he believed that, if she were well again, they'd share the same warmth, the same closeness and love. But now as they sat there, Hubert felt a heaviness because he knew that, in a very real way, he sat there alone.

Hubert planted one more summer garden that year. Winter came and spring followed. Whitey had another litter of piglets in March. A year after that, in the following March, just as Whitey was pregnant with her third litter, Hubert had to move Mary Ann to the local nursing home. He could no longer bathe her and she rarely ate more than a few bites. He could not leave her alone, not for five minutes, and it was wearing on him. She often lapsed into long periods where she would lie in a fetal position, moaning. It nearly drove Hubert out of his mind, much as he loved her. She needed round-the-clock care and only the local nursing home in town could provide it.

He drove her into town himself, having packed a small bag for her. He included her favorite lilac perfume, a few pieces of clothing, and a holy card she always carried, one that pictured St Thérèse, the Little Flower; Mannie had always considered her to be a spiritual friend. He packed her medications, even though he knew they'd issue new ones at the nursing home. They drove through the countryside which he knew so well, past neighbors, past the parish church, down the highway and into town.

He walked her into the lobby of the home and reluctantly, so sadly, he handed her over to the nurses. He went with her to the room assigned to her, the last place she would call home. They politely took the bag and put her things in the small closet. Then they dressed her in nursing home clothing and helped

her onto the bed. There were rails to keep her from falling out, but she was simply bewildered. He sat there by her for the longest time, just sitting in silence as she lay on the bed. He had no idea how long he was there. His heart was heavy; they had once promised that, no matter what, they would take care of each other to the bitter end. "No nursing homes!" had been their mutual promise. He never thought it would come to this, not even as she declined. As he sat there, he considered whether he should just take her home again. He could go to the front desk and explain that he felt he had made a mistake, and they could both get back in the car and go home, back to the farm. But then he remembered the last months of her constant weeping and moaning, and how difficult helping her clean up had become — impossible really, he thought. No, he was doing the right thing, he told himself. Then he lapsed back into those deep thoughts and just sat there. He couldn't bring himself to leave her, the love of his life; he just didn't think he could walk out of there and drive home alone without her. So he sat. He was utterly preoccupied with his thoughts.

He couldn't bring himself to leave her, the love of his life.

"Dad?" It was Frank, their oldest son, at the door of her room. "How long have you been here? I stopped by the farm twice this afternoon but you weren't around."

"No, I know. I've been here, helping Mom get settled."

"I know, Pop. Alice called from the front desk. She said she thought you might need some company. Why don't you come out and have supper with JoAnne and me tonight? The kids are off at the ball game over in Parkton so it's just the two of us. She's got a ham in the oven. Come on, Pop. Let's go get some supper. It's time for them to feed Mom anyway."

"Is it? How do you know?"

"Alice told me it might be better if you just left it to them tonight." Hubert knew what that meant. His beloved Mannie was taking another step down the pike and her diet would be only liquids now. Frank was right; he didn't really want to see that, not this first night. After the kids all left home, Hubert and Mary Ann started having supper together every evening, just the two of them. They cooked together, often hauling in a load of food from the gardens in the summer or up from the cellar in the winter. They loved candlelight and Sinatra. Hubert usually opened a bottle of wine; Mannie sipped while they cooked. Then they'd sit at the table after supper, jabbering about this and that. They really cherished these meals, and now they were among Hubert's most important memories.

Hubert was eating alone now. Even in her last months at home, she couldn't sit at the table. He'd cook and bring the meal to her wherever she was in the house. But it had to be a simple sandwich. Nothing hot worked. She drank only through a straw but had to be coached even to do that.

"OK, Frank, let's go," he said. "Just give me a minute here." Frank stepped out into the hallway. Hubert stood beside the bed and stared down at his Mannie. He leaned in and kissed her tenderly on the forehead, touching her hand and gently rubbing it the way she had always liked. She had no idea who he was. At the doorway, he turned and looked back one more time; then he walked through it, closed the door quietly, heaved a small, private sigh, and that was that. He followed Frank out to their farm, driving slowly, almost overwhelmed with sadness. He felt so alone.

A few months later, she would be dead and Hubert would be truly alone. After she died, he actually missed her. He was relieved for her sake that she had died, but he still missed her. It was a big funeral, of course. Everyone loved Mary Ann. All

the children and grandchildren were there. The whole parish turned out. A big roast beef meal was served and people stood around talking until nearly four in the afternoon. But most of them had cows to milk, so they headed on home. Two or three of the kids stayed with Hubert through the weekend. And as he watched the last one of their children drive out of the farm yard on Sunday afternoon, Hubert actually, and for the first time, choked up in tears and sobs. He had been carrying this for all these years, seven years of illness, seven years alone together. A long, slow goodbye. He really missed her more than he ever thought possible. His longing was palpable. It made him ache. He sobbed as he walked back up to the house and onto the porch. He saw her shawl there, on her chair. He picked it up and he could still smell the lilac scent of the perfume he always helped her put on, even at the very end.

He looked out over the farmyard, gazing through the tears, and felt an emptiness inside him that only Mannie ever filled. She was it, the love of his life. Who else could ever share this with him? But then, a sudden thought: Whitey! He dropped the shawl and dashed out to the barn and, sure enough, a dozen wiggly piglets were blinking their eyes and pushing in to the tits. Whitey was lying on her side, exhausted but motherly, grunting out little commands. He pulled up a milk stool and sat near her for a while. The barn still smelled of cattle and rotting feed, even though the dairy herd had been gone for almost five years. Two lone steers occupied the stalls now, one a yearling and the other almost ready for butcher. Both were Holsteins. Hubert always milked Holsteins, so, even though better breeds of beef cattle were all the rage, he kept what he was used to. "Hubert's Happy Holsteins," the kids had always called them.

His thoughts ranged as he sat there, remembering this and almost remembering that. He had been one of the builders of

this barn. He knew every board, every feed trough. He thought of warm summers with the doors wide open and cold winters with hay stuck in the cracks to keep out the wind. So many memories. He almost forgot that Mannie was gone, so deep were his thoughts.

In time he returned to the house, turned on lights, and got some leftovers from the funeral ready for supper. Not much. He didn't feel hungry. He'd been alone in this house for the last four months, so he was used to the quiet. But all this time she was at least nearby, in town, in the nursing home. Another wave of the reality of her death washed over him. He stood looking out the kitchen window to the south, heartbroken and stunned.