

Peter's Gift

by Barbara Anderson

*God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain...*

Peter breathed a sigh of relief as the casket was finally closed. As far as coffins go, it was stunningly beautiful, he'd expected nothing less. Sprays and stands of flowers filled the church everywhere a space could be found. The anteroom, now nearly empty, had been packed with the many whose lives she had touched. They had stood shoulder to shoulder around the sides of the room, and out the door, waiting patiently for their turn to file past the coffin to pay last respects. They were all now waiting in the sanctuary for the service to begin.

The ritual of viewing the dead before the funeral service was supposed to bring some comfort. Peter knew this, but he hated it, nonetheless. As he'd stood there by Charles' side, he couldn't help recalling his cousin as the beautiful and vibrant woman as she had been in days gone by. The cold, still form that lay before him looked like nothing more than a sad, wax imitation of the child ... the girl... the glowing, strong woman he had known for so long.

No, this isn't you, Caroline, he thought. You were so much more than this. Forgive me, forgive me.

Peter couldn't shake the sensation that there was a stone in his pit of his stomach. Guilt and sorrow plagued him, and he'd been unable to eat for days.



Charles' firm hand squeezed Peter's shoulder, bringing him out of his reverie. "It's time. They're going to move her into the sanctuary now."

Peter only nodded. He attempted to speak, but the lump in his throat prevented any sound from escaping his lips. He tried to clear it, to no avail. Charles pulled him into a brotherly embrace.

"You did everything you could, Peter," he said, perceiving Peter's thoughts. "She knew that."

Peter shook his head sadly. No matter how he tried, he couldn't escape the feeling that he had failed her. Despite his best efforts to be strong for his friend, the tears began to fall, bringing fresh, stinging waves of shame. *I'm supposed to be here to comfort them, he rebuked himself. Not the other way around.*

Perceiving his thoughts again, Charles argued with Peter's unspoken emotions. "We are here to comfort each other, Peter. Believe me, Cathy and I couldn't get through this without you."

Pulling a large handkerchief from his pocket, Peter blew his nose loudly. Finally, managing to speak, he said, "Caroline trusted me, Charles. She put her faith in me and I let her down. I failed you all."

"You're a doctor, Peter, not God. She didn't see it that way. She believed that she lived as long as she did, because of the heroic efforts you made."

Peter looked doubtful.

"When she was first diagnosed," Charles continued. "She told me she just wanted to live long enough for Cathy to remember her. She wanted our daughter to remember how much her mother loved her. You gave Caroline and Cathy that gift. You gave *me* that gift. Don't underestimate it. She cherished it, every single day, for the last several years."

Unconvinced, Peter shook his head and replied, "She deserved so much more. There was too much pain in her short life. She deserved better...she deserved better..." His voice trailed off as he recalled the tragedies that had been so much a part of Caroline's life.

Charles was unwilling to allow his friend to lament the life of the woman he loved. He felt that it mocked her memory. "You know what she told me the night we first met?"

Peter waited.

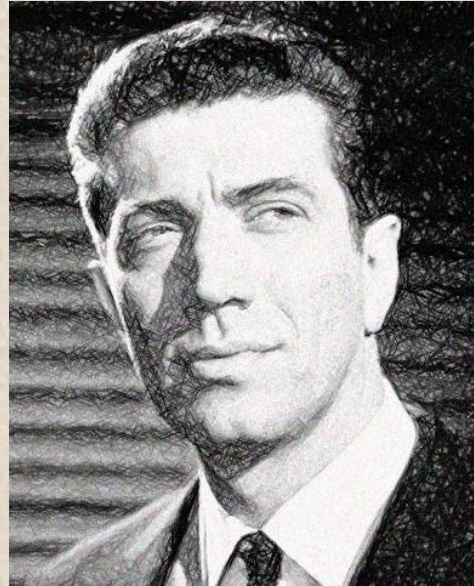
"She said, '*We don't always get what we deserve, Mr. Chandler. We just get what we get.*' Caroline treasured every moment of happiness and she tried not to dwell on the rest."

"That sounds like our Caroline. She was the strongest woman I've ever known. I can't believe you remember what she said to you all those years ago."

"I think I remember every word she ever said to me." Charles smiled wistfully though misty eyes. "I was hopelessly in love with her from the first moment I laid eyes on her. I've always hung on her every word."

"She certainly was one of a kind." Peter conceded.

"Yes, she *was*." Charles nodded. "But I see so much of her in Cathy. Besides the striking resemblance, there's so much of her mother's strength in her too."



They both turned toward the somber young girl, standing stoically by the door, waiting so they could all walk into the chapel together. She reached out and let her hand gently brush the sleek, white surface of the coffin, as it was wheeled passed her. The heart-wrenching gesture touched them both.

“What am I going to do, Peter? I don’t know anything about raising a daughter alone.”

“Caroline expects us to step up to it, Old Friend. She has entrusted us with her heart’s best treasure. And I swear on my life, I won’t let her down again.”

“Me either.” Charles vowed, at the same time, doubting his ability to keep the solemn promise he had made to his dying wife. It was his turn to fight back the tears.

As Peter reached around Charles’ shoulders to take his turn comforting his friend, he said, “We’ll do it together, Charles. We’ll do it *together*.”



*... God hath not promised we shall not know
Toil and temptation, trouble and woe;
He hath not told us we shall not bear
many a burden, many a care.*

*God hath not promised smooth roads and wide,
Swift, easy travel, needing no guide;
Never a mountain rocky and steep,
Never a river turbid and deep*

*But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labor, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love*

- What God Hath Promised, by Annie Johnson Flint

In loving memory of Joseph Campanella, aka Peter Alcott