

## The End of An Era by Carmen Murray

As Freddy Murray sat at the deathbed of his wife of fifty-something years, all he could do was apologize and think. None of his kinfolk knew what he was apologizing for. His granddaughter and daughter in law, gossipers by nature, suspected it may have been about infidelity and all of the ways he had wronged Juanita. Maybe he was sorry for the way a promising and joy-filled life had come to a disastrous end, on both their parts. Cancer ravaged the couple's bodies, his wife's developing more like a weed while his bloomed akin to a century plant. The last time the Murrays had been in their son Steven's two-story abode on Spring Hill had been years before the pandemic. It was for their fiftieth anniversary party, and the cream platters still sat preserved in the cabinet. They reflected the culmination of five decades spent tied together: Juanita comatose on the first floor of her son's house and Freddy bent over his cane feeling sorry.

Freddy had become deeply entangled in his thoughts in the years that he had been sick. His mind was so overcome with emotions, ideas, and words that the man grew lost in the midst; he was like a critter trapped in the bushes outside his house on Kent Road. Slowly Freddy withdrew into his two hundred pound shell. It was reminiscent of the time just after his mother, Mary Alice Murray, died in a heatwave. Freddy fought like hell until the door to her apartment gave way, and he witnessed her body lying there, her soul evaporating in the heat. No oxygen machine was attached to her body, like Juanita's. She was just gone. Despite Steven's functioning air conditioning unit, his wrinkled body felt like it would evaporate too, and he couldn't breathe, just mutter apologies. Anxiety had been a constant companion since his mother's death. He couldn't cope with the loss and the way in which he found her, the woman who brought him onto this plane to experience all of life's joys: baseball, fishing, and Juanita. A

branch snapped and then the twigs began to fall. They called it a breakdown. Freddy spoke to a professional for the first time and went on duloxetine to preserve some normalcy, but that event had shifted something.

After the shift, Freddy resumed his role as the kind and funny husband, father, and eventually grandfather that his family had known, a man regionally notorious for his sweet tooth and green thumb. Many weren't aware of how large the branches had sprouted in Freddy's mind until he escaped one night into his dimly lit neighborhood off of Daupin Island Parkway. Juanita called Steven for assistance and then she called an ambulance. Freddy behaved erratically and wholly unlike the stern but mild-mannered man who she had laid next to for the last fifty years. After the episode, he rested with a relaxed but dazed expression in a hospital room that smelled dank. It was a urinary tract infection. Then it was dementia. His family was bewildered, no one would've thought the common disease would affect their patriarch. All Freddy could do was think.

Occasionally he would diverge into a television show or movie, to give his mind the reprieve of the branches twisting and tangling on themselves. He and Juanita would watch HGTV, her choice for entertainment, from their king-sized bed. When he was tired of hearing hosts drone on about budgets and crown molding, he would pull the covers over his head and think until he fell asleep. After Juanita escaped their domain for her doctor's appointments, Freddy was able to recline on the furniture that Juanita picked out and watch what he wanted. He could get lost in the crime and legal narratives played out by Raymond Burr or seeing his favorite baseball player, Jackie Robinson, achieve his dreams. It didn't matter that he had seen every episode of Perry Mason five times over or that when he was asked about what he wanted

to watch, he always had the same answer. He would just sit with his granddaughter, Carmen, or whatever relative had been implored to babysit that day, and get lost in his programs.

The urge to escape into the television didn't emerge while he sat with Juanita during those final days of a mild Alabama winter. He would be with and protect her until the end, and she wouldn't dissolve into the ether alone. What he didn't know was that the matriarch had ensured protective measures of her own for her husband. For years she had been diligent with their finances, investing in insurance policies and keeping them close to her chest like in one of their card games. Also, their son whispered promises to his mother in the dimness of his rearranged living room, vowing to care for his father so she could pass in solace. The couple took care of each other and Freddy let Juanita get away with anything and everything, it was the axis of their relationship.

There was no foreseeing this finale for the Murrays, and by the time it was necessary to make certain provisions, the curtains were already drawing closed. There was a will, but as long as Freddy was recycling carbon dioxide into the Earth, his relatives wouldn't inherit the fruit of his garden, his house, or any of the money in his bank account. It's remarkable how sickness and death will have kinfolk crawling out of the woodworks and circling like gnats. His daughter and son and their families remained customary figures at hospital stays, doctor's appointments, the Kent Road house, and their inevitable sojourn at Steven's abode. Cheryl, their daughter, relaxed her visits after the Murrays left Kent Road. Some weight was lifted off of her shoulders. She never realized how terrifying the role of the oldest child was. The responsibility was gone, but in its place a realization sprouted. It was really over.

Faces they hadn't seen in years were suddenly parking at the foot of the steep driveway and ringing the doorbell, carrying gifts to lay at the altar of Juanita. Danielle, their second oldest

granddaughter, fell out with her grandfather over money, years ago. A victim in only her mind, she had only recently reconnected with her sickly grandparents. If this were *Imitation of Life*, she would be draped over the coffin of her grandmother, who she rebuffed because she was so warped by her own psyche. Danielle brought regret. There was Christina, a niece, who spent much of her youth on Kent Road. She had since moved out of the orbit of the Murrays and their kin, but never forgot or was forgotten. For a decade her name was spoken reverently by her relatives who were proud of her accomplishments and family up North. She brought gratitude and didn't leave their sides until the very end.

Their friends remained faithful companions through the duration. Nene, Juanita's best friend from the Kingdom Hall, never abandoned the special bond she and Juanita had formed over decades of meetings, tea parties, and dinners at Chinese buffets. She stood at the patio door, shining over her sister as Kingdom songs played from inside. Juanita had a special bond with most people she came into contact with. She never met a stranger and took care of those who needed it: children, siblings, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. Freddy was more reserved. He got along with most, but before his illnesses he preferred long walks down the Parkway, fishing in creeks near his neighborhood, and trips to the Dollar Store up the road for snacks. Even his daughter in law knew precious little about him, and his grandchildren who weren't blessed with Juanita's fortitude couldn't remember ever having a meaningful conversation with their papa. As he got sicker, his legacy and personality got tamped down by the branches of his mind. In glimpses of sunlight certain traits would bloom, like his humor and charm. Freddy was a lover of America's greatest pastime, even obtaining a baseball scholarship in his youth. Freddy was an excellent student and particularly enjoyed science in grade school. Freddy was a provider for his family, a trait which was initiated by Juanita's first pregnancy with Cheryl. Freddy was the most

competitive member of his family, only surpassed by his wife, whose dedication to Scrabble boggled most players. No one would've guessed that she would go on to lose the game of life and that Freddy would be left to play alone.

The real game began after Juanita succumbed to her cancer in a morphine laced coma, snoring louder than the lawnmower Freddy kept out back in his shed. Due to Steven's deathbed oath, he became the caretaker and conservator over his father and his finances. He who holds the wallet shall carry the crown. A sibling rivalry of epic proportions began as Steven and Cheryl duked out their grievances through hateful words, eventually landing in court. Freddy, now wholly dependent on his cane, was dragged into the courthouse downtown to witness his children throw domesticated tantrums in front of a judge. Their arguments had morphed from their younger years. Before Steven was just an annoying younger brother fiending for some power in this world and Cheryl had been determined to illustrate that he had none. Now Steven was a fifty year old lawyer with a house in a good part of town, driving a shiny white Cadillac. Now he had the money and the power. Now he ran things.

Before, Freddy had some power in his household and affairs. He could threaten to whup his children, or worse turn Juanita loose on them. Now that his wife was gone, Freddy often retreated to the vestiges of his mind while laying in his room or reclined in his dedicated beige chair in Steven's family room. He had no real power now. None of his relatives received anything of monetary value after his wife's death, but Freddy inherited a great deal. He inherited the house on Kent Road, into which he had poured decades of funds stemming from his job at the Housing Board. It wasn't grand. It wasn't like Steven's two-story on Spring Hill, with more room than his family knew what to do with, but the bones of his house had gristle. Freddy planted a garden in his backyard, the reputation of which was discussed among generations of his

relatives and all of his friends. He also gave into each of his wife's whims. On the dirt that once housed the playground his grandchildren frolicked on stood a beautiful screened gazebo. Those two features were all he had to offer the house on Kent Road, so when his wife died he inherited a gazebo, a garden, and a house full of memories and reminders of Juanita and their life together.

He traded one master for another while in the care of Steven and his wife. Steven resembled Juanita in looks and temperament, grasping control of every facet of his environment. Steven was the boss. Steven was afraid. Steven loved Freddy. They didn't wax poetic about love in their relationship. Hugs, kisses, and emotions were saved for the women in the family. Steven's adoration appeared in his determination to delay Freddy's departure from this Earth. He delegated of course, with nurses and his wife, Cecelia, overseeing most of his father's routine. Freddy would eat whole foods and take whatever medicine necessary to stave off any sickness that Steven could control. His days of dollar store cookies and dump cakes were over, as he turned to fruit and yogurt to stave off his incurable sweet tooth. While Juanita was the boss, she was also his partner in life, but her son wasn't interested in partnership. Steven wanted to put off the inevitable.

Freddy inherited time after Juanita had vanished from his sight. Hours turned into days which turned into years where he lived a life in a vessel that didn't resemble the one he used to occupy. There was no wife, no house, only a room in his son's domain, no weekly ventures to the Kingdom Hall, now he only saw the faces of his friends through a screen while hearing the good word via a computer speaker. Often unable to last the entire program, he dozed off with his chin dipped at Steven's glass kitchen table. The culprit behind his vast amount of time left, besides his son's health kick, were the doctors he visited on a weekly basis. Hours were logged in the hospital, with Freddy smacking on all the cheese dusted treats his son restricted, while chemicals

turned his hands a garish shade of pink. These hands used to plant lemon trees and cucumber vines and swung lines of bait at the creek near Kent Road and dangled by his side as he strolled through the neighborhood. Freddy Murray inherited more than all of his relatives after his wife's passing, but during his bouts of thinking he often reminisced on the idea that he was merely existing until Jehova called him to live in Juanita's presence once more.