

Yellow as Legal Pads



Fran Stewart

Sunday May 5, 1996 - Martinsville, Georgia

I slipped on my black dress, clipped my hair up on top of my head, and walked out of my lonely bedroom. Marmalade leaped onto the railing and walked with dainty grace beside me until I reached the top of the stairs. How does she do that without falling?

I am a cat. I know where my center is.

She hopped onto my shoulder, still with exquisite grace, and hitched a ride downstairs. "Guard the house while I'm gone," I told her. "And don't wake up your Aunt Glaze."

Of course I didn't bother to lock the door behind me. We don't do that in Martinsville.

A gray day. Appropriate, I supposed. I hoped it wouldn't rain. My granddaughter, Verity, old beyond her four years, had asked if there would be a limousine for the funeral. I told her I had decided against it. My green Buick was good enough for this.

When I reached Braetonburg, I pulled up in front of the old house I used to live in. There were several cars there already. I probably should have gotten here early, I thought, but this was the best I could do. It didn't seem fair to have driven home alone yesterday from my honeymoon and today be facing a funeral at nine o'clock in the morning.

As I walked up to the front door, I noticed that the ivy seemed to be getting ahead of Sally. Someday I'd volunteer to come back and help her dig some more of it out. Why did I ever plant that stuff to begin with?

“Mom, I’m so glad you’re here.” Sandra, the older of my daughters, was wearing black, too. It didn’t suit her. Of course, my black didn’t suit me, either. I looked like the undertaker instead of—of what? I wondered. Was there a title for this?

I could hear Sally, my younger daughter, the pregnant one, directing traffic in the kitchen. There would be food spread out on the big oak table. And the children would be milling around underfoot.

“Would you like to look at the body?” Sandra asked me.

There had been too much death recently, but this body I had to look at. “I suppose now is as good a time as any.”

She led me into the living room, and there was the coffin in the center of the room. I nodded to the other women who were ranged about, some sitting, some standing. I noticed that Sally had moved the furniture around. I suppose that was her right now that she lived there and I didn’t. But it was a bit disconcerting. My eyes were drawn back to the casket. The light wood was attractive, and the children had drawn designs on the sides and top. It was a true work of love. And Bob looked quite fetching like that, lying on top of the yellow silk lining.

Before I had time to think much about it, the pall bearers came into the room, closed the coffin, and gathered it up. Sally and Sandra stepped to either side of me, and we walked behind the casket, out of the living room, down the hallway, out the front door, and into the small field across the street.

The grave had already been dug, beneath the enormous oak that shadowed the ground that early May morning. We gathered around and waited for a moment in silence. Then Verity Marie, the oldest of my grandchildren, walked forward and threw some rose petals into the grave.

The pall bearers lowered the coffin.

As one of them began to scoop dirt onto the lid, Verity cried out. “Oh Mommy, can I look at him one more time?”

I reached forward and rested my hand on Verity’s little shoulder as Sandra said, “Of course you can, dear.” It is so moving, the anguish of children.

Sandra reached down into the grave and flipped open the lid of the cigar box. Verity picked up Bob, her goldfish who had died several days ago and who had been kept intact until I could return from my disastrous honeymoon. It was an honor to have the date of a funeral held up just for me.

She is the most unusual cat I've ever known. Right from the start she was demonstrative of her affection. She started by bringing me dead mice, but soon she graduated to hugs and purr sessions.

For a moment it was a hopeless tangle of orange and white tabby cat, me, my purse, and the yellow scarf that had been draped around my shoulders a minute before. Oh well. I gave myself up to adoration and buried my face in the incredibly soft fur. "I missed you, Marmy. . . ." I felt the purr before I heard it.

I missed you, too, Widelap, but my thoughts were with you all the time.

I no longer think it's silly to talk to my cat. She always purrs back at me, so it feels like a real conversation. I pulled away a bit and looked into her golden eyes. "Did Glaze take good care of you?"

Yes, we had long conversations, and she read me bedtime stories. Her books are not interesting, but I like her voice. Fishgiver was here a lot, too, and he brought me good food, like salmon and chicken.

Marmalade, who was now purring her little heart out, seemed to have put on some weight. I could feel the beginning of a pouch underneath her. I knew she wasn't pregnant, since I'd had her spayed shortly after she wandered into the library last year and adopted me. I wondered if Glaze had been overfeeding her. More likely Tom had been bringing salmon from his restaurant for the "furball," which is what he called Marmy.

As if summoned by my thoughts—or more likely by Marmalade's antics—my gorgeous, silver-haired younger sister Glaze, who had come to Martinsville from Philadelphia three weeks ago to help me get the house ready for the wedding, sauntered down the walkway, hardly limping at all. The ankle she had sprained just before the wedding seemed to be much better. "No need for me to hurry," she said with a smile. "The welcoming committee seems to have you tied up." Once I managed to untangle my scarf and set Marmalade down, she enveloped me in a big sisterly embrace. Her favorite vanilla perfume wafted around both of us, bringing cookies to my mind.

She always smells sweet.

"Let me grab my suitcase, and then I could use some iced tea."

Smellsweet did not make any.

Glaze grimaced. "I forgot to make some."

"No iced tea?" I said. "After all I've been through, you don't have any iced tea for me?"

“Quit wrinkling your eyebrows at me. I’ve lived away from Georgia too long to remember iced tea.”

There’s some nice chicken in the fridge.

I stepped around Marmalade, placed my hands on my hips, and fixed my middle-aged sister with a stare. “Just because you’ve been living out of state all this time, that’s no excuse. Didn’t our mama teach you right, young lady?”

To be honest, though, our mother had been the last person on earth ever to think about glasses of iced tea, that southern staple of gracious living. Mom was—and still is—a potter. Her hands are usually in clay at the pottery shop that fills a big corner of the backyard at the old house in Braetonburg, a few miles up the valley from here. She won’t stand for having easily-broken glasses around. And she can’t abide plastic. Mugs were her stock in trade, so we had hot tea year-round as we were growing up.

Now, however, iced tea sounded wonderful, mostly because it wasn’t available. Why do I so often long for something I don’t have?

You have me. And there is some chicken in the fridge.

Guess I should be grateful for what I do have. I’m glad I write a gratitude list each night. It helps me remember how lucky I am.

Glaze appeased me with a welcome suggestion. “I have some fresh orange juice, if you’re interested.”

I did a quick mental computation. “It’s been four hours since lunch, so juice sounds great.” I always wait four hours after eating carbohydrates or proteins before I eat fruit in any form. Or I eat the fruit half-an-hour *before* carbs and proteins. It’s one of those strange ideas that I’m convinced works wonders.

I stick to cat food, treats, and mice. And chicken.

I even had Bob eating that way before . . . No. No, I didn’t want to think about that. Not now.

You will find joy again, Widelap.

I had to step over Marmalade again as I linked arms with Glaze and started up the stairs onto the wide porch. “Did you have a good stay here?” I asked her.

“Yes. I did have a good time, except for worrying about you. House-sitting is a breeze. Marmalade and I got along really well.”

“You didn’t have any trouble getting around?” I had been somewhat concerned because of her sprained ankle, but it must have healed quickly.

“Not a bit of a problem. Of course, Tom helped out some the first few days.”

He has been here every day, bringing me good food from his restaurant.

Tom Parkman, Bob's closest friend, owned CT's, the best restaurant in Keagan County, Georgia. He was fascinated with Glaze right from the moment they met, almost two weeks ago. I could easily imagine how willing he'd been to help. I wondered how much . . . Don't go there, Biscuit, I thought. None of your business.

I could tell you everything that went on, if only you would listen to me.

Marmalade was certainly underfoot a lot. Probably just happy to see me home. It occurred to me that she'd make a good snitch, if only she could talk.

Mouse-droppings! Some day you will learn to listen to me.

I stepped over Marmalade again and crossed over the wide planks of oak flooring to set my purse down on the lovely old oak drop-leaf table that graces the big entranceway. My first mother-in-law gave it to me as a wedding gift, twenty-some-odd years ago.

Glaze walked up beside me. "By the way," she said, "I'm not heading home tomorrow. I'll stay as long as you need me to be here for you."

Bless her heart, I thought. I ran my hand over the table's beautifully-grained wood. I had been so looking forward to coming home with my husband. "Oh, Glaze," I said, "how am I ever going to deal with this?"

By the time we got out the big red-striped glasses and poured the freshly-squeezed orange juice, my despair had subsided somewhat. I gave Marmalade a little nibble of some chicken I saw on the top shelf of the fridge. Tom must have been coming by rather often with treats. Oh well, I could start her on a diet tomorrow.

No thank you.

Glaze suggested that we sit out on the verandah. That was what Elizabeth Hoskins, the widow who sold us the house, insisted we should call the huge covered porch. We gravitated around to the left, where the swing is, on the shady east side of the house. We could hear the birds chirping as they flew in and out of the Lady Banks Rose that clammers all over the back corner of the porch-verandah. Its big yellow blooms should be popping out within a month. I can't wait. Marmalade hopped up on the swing between Glaze and me, and we rocked gently for several minutes in silence.

Glaze took a deep breath and set her orange juice glass down on the floor next to the swing. I was going to have to get some little tables. "Biscuit," she said, "you're going to be better off if you talk this through. So, I want you to tell me. Other than the murder, how was your visit to Savannah?"

I finally managed a relatively coherent story. She knew some of it already, of course, but the sun went down and the mosquitoes came out before I got it all told. Glaze was right. It felt healing somehow to talk about it.

That night, Glaze was planning to sleep on the couch in the living room, since there wasn't a guest room. I couldn't face sharing my bed with my sister, when I had so looked forward to having my husband there with me. As I walked up the stairs to my lonely bed .

..

I will be there with you and will keep you safe.

. . . I wondered idly what Glaze had thought of the wedding. There hadn't been time to ask.

My Gratitude List for Saturday May 4th

Five things for which I am grateful:

1. Orange juice
2. A safe trip home
3. Home itself
4. Glaze
5. Marmalade

my gratitude list:

Widelap and Smellsweet

naps

bird-watching from the window

the swing

being patted gently (and hugged)

Yellow as Legal Pads



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