

## HAPPY PLACE

by Beth Davies

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With a steaming cup of Jasmine tea in her hands, Annie stood at the living room window and looked out through the panes. Golden yellow, fiery red, and burnished copper leaves played hopscotch in the street. Elementary school children gathered in front of her neighbor's house waiting for the school bus. She sipped the tea and recoiled – still too hot.

Silence enveloped the house, and she wondered what time Jeremy had left for work that October morning; she didn't even hear him get out of bed. That wasn't so unusual since he started sleeping in the spare bedroom over a year ago, claiming her snoring was keeping him up. But most days she'd at least hear the shower running and the front door closing. Not today. She was grateful to sleep undisturbed, because she had slept fitfully, waking every few hours to check the news on her phone. With the global wars, earthquakes and other devastating storms, and chaos in the political offices of Washington, the news would keep anyone up at night.

Annie spent the rest of that Friday as she usually did. She took Penny, their mini poodle, for a walk in the woods. She drove by the gym, vowing silently to herself for the thousandth time that she would work out again, starting tomorrow. After eating lunch with a friend, she shopped for a few items for dinner for Saturday's company. Friday was a no-cook night. For the past twenty or so years, she and Jeremy ate dinner at the bar at a local restaurant, which felt like going to dinner with a large group of friends. The same crowd gathered at the same time every week, and the familiar routine of swapping stories, watching sports on the big screens, and eating good food never got old.

Jeremy was always home from work by four-thirty on a Friday night, so by the time five-thirty rolled around, Annie started to feel annoyed. Their seats at the bar would be gone. At six she sent her first text: *ETA?*

She got no answer.

At seven she sent her next text: *Everything OK?*

She called his number at seven fifteen. No answer. She called again and left a message. She sent another text at eight: *I'm worried. Call me.*

At 8:10 her phone beeped. She looked at the message.

*It's over.*

*What's over?* She typed.

*Us.*

She stared at his last reply in disbelief. She called again and he didn't pick up. The next time she called, two minutes later, the phone went straight to voicemail. He had shut his phone off. And that is how, after twenty-six years of marriage, Annie's husband left her.

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The months that followed left Annie as a shattered version of herself, with her emotions altering between states of disbelief, anger, grief, and painful isolation. The day Jeremy left, he stole her confidence and stuffed it in his left coat pocket. He took anxiety and loneliness out of his right coat pocket and tossed it her way on the way out the door. She could not bring herself to show up at the bar on Friday night, but instead cooked frozen pizza and ate it while watching the latest crime dramas on the Mystery Channel. Where she once wondered, *'wouldn't it just be easier to divorce rather than murder your spouse?'* Annie now thought, on some very rare, dark days, that it may have been easier if she were no longer alive because the life she was now living

wasn't one she could easily adjust to.

As time moved on, and the second anniversary of her 'before' life approached, Annie sat in a plush red velvet antique wing-back chair with a cup of tea and reflected on what she had learned over the past two years. She learned Jeremy had cleaned out his clothes in the middle of the night before he left. She learned that he left her for his twenty-eight-year-old assistant, who was also married. She learned, after poking around the computer and their bank account, that this affair had been going on for the prior two years. Some transactions older than two years made her suspect this was not his only indiscretion. She learned that she was very good at hiring attorneys, and she was satisfied with what she got in the settlement: Penny, the house, a hefty bank account, and half of his retirement account. He got the cabin on the lake in New Hampshire, which was fine by her. She wasn't a lake swimmer anyway. She learned that therapy was very helpful to assuage her guilt and shame, and process that what happened was *Jeremy's* fault, not hers. She learned that the burning rage she felt was a great motivator at the gym. Little by little, she grew stronger, both physically and mentally.

In the spring, Annie scooped up Penny, stroked her apricot coat, and took her out to the back yard. She put her hand on the metal door of the trailer and paused. She hadn't opened it since Jeremy left. The Airstream and Jeremy's truck were other items her attorney negotiated for her. She never really intended to go camping again, but she didn't want the other woman taking anything more from her. Jeremy had taken his "summer car" – the BMW – to start his new life.

That April day, when Annie finally opened the trailer door, she burst into tears, overwhelmed with the memories that had been, and those that would never be. This trailer had been her and Jeremy's happy place, or so she thought. The Airstream was well equipped with a dining area, couch, two TV's, full kitchen, pantry, full bathroom, and a queen-sized bed. It had a killer stereo system and dual zones for heat and air conditioning, more than her house had.

They had taken trips out West, buying turquoise jewelry and leather belts from Native American craftspeople who lined the Santa Fe Plaza. As they sat on the lawn watching over five hundred hot air balloons ascend to the skies at the International Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, Jeremy had turned to her and said, "I so want to do that...just float up and away into thin air." Had he known then he would do exactly that? They saw prairie dogs, bison, and Mexican pronghorn roaming the Badlands in South Dakota, left the rig at sunrise to watch a once-a-year buffalo round-up in Custer State Park. They hiked the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, coming back to see three elk munching on grass at their campsite. They ate dozens of oysters and sat on the red clay beaches of Prince Edward Island, Canada, and camped up and down the east coast, from Maine to the Florida Keys. Each time they rolled out of their driveway, the excitement of the next adventure was palpable.

Annie liked to tell people that she was the Director of Food and Beverage, and Jeremy was the Director of Operations. She handled preparing the inside of the rig for departure and set up after arrival. She made sure the camper was clean, was stocked with food and beverages, that all loose items were secured before pulling away, and that the correct switches had been turned off before leaving. Jeremy handled packing the truck with accessories, hooking up the trailer, connecting the electrical, sewer and water, and dumping their waste tanks when needed. He also handled the repairs: fixing the occasional rivet that popped out, or tightening a drawer hinge, and once, repaired a leaking pipe.

She wiped her tears away, frustrated. They had never cross-trained each other in their duties. *I could never do this by myself*, she thought. *Maybe it's time to sell it.*

She opened the door and put Penny inside. Penny's tail wagged furiously as she nosed

around the trailer, sniffing everywhere, as if she were reliving her own memories of their travels. Penny jumped up on the couch, settling in like a princess on top of a pillow. Annie pulled out her cleaning supplies and got to work, dusting, scrubbing, and tossing items no longer needed. The first to hit the trash was a sign Jeremy bought that they posted at the front of the rig at each campground. It read: "Making Memories, One Campsite at a Time! The Dawsons." Working through a closet, she pulled a sweater of Jeremy's off the hanger and pressed it to her nose, inhaling the faint scent of him. Surprisingly, she did not well up with tears again. She felt no more anger or longing for him to be here with her. Annie tossed the sweater on the couch next to Penny. She watched her dog get up, sniff the sweater, then paw at it like she was searching for a hidden treat. Then, with one quick swipe, Penny pushed the sweater onto the floor and settled back on her pillow. The dog gave a satisfied "Hmmp," as if to indicate she, too, was over him.

Annie looked around her rig. She missed the travel so much. She loved waking up in her little home on wheels, having leisurely coffee in the morning, exploring her surroundings, then making a nice dinner in the kitchen, and sitting by the fire outside after dinner, lingering with a glass of wine. After three hours, and two trips into the house to launder the linens, pillow covers, and curtains, she finished making the bed. She was so tired that she lay down on it. Penny joined her and snuggled into her ribs.

She woke in the dark, disoriented. Her watch glowed 5:38am. Annie had slept solidly through the night, more soundly than she had in a long, long time. She realized she was still in the rig, in the familiar comfort of her second home, and decided at that moment, she wouldn't – no – she *couldn't* sell her dreams. She would learn. She would watch videos, look at manuals, and join on-line groups to figure out exactly what she needed to do.

By the middle of May, Annie felt she was ready to take the rig for a test drive. She pulled out her departure checklist and worked her way through it. The tire pressures were low, so she lugged the air compressor from the garage to the back yard and inflated the tires to the correct PSI. After multiple tries, she successfully backed up her truck to the hitch and secured it. She next had to lift the jack at the hitch so it wouldn't drag on the road while driving. She pressed the button to raise it, but nothing happened. She Googled the problem then cross checked the manual. She located the replacement fuses and put in a new one. The jack lifted on command. Like Rocky Balboa after knocking out an opponent, Annie took a victory lap around the rig, her arms raised high. What she thought would take ten minutes took over two hours. *But she did it!* She figured things out all on her own.

The first trip she and Penny would take was less than two weeks away. They would stay four nights at a state campground near the ocean in Rhode Island. She had mentioned to Jeremy many times how much she wanted to visit the area, as it was close to the beach, local wineries, and had plenty of nature walks for Penny. "Rhode Island isn't on my bucket list," he'd said.

Annie finished packing the truck and camper. Penny was so excited, she jumped into her bed in the back seat of the truck unaided. Annie eased the rig out onto the street, pulled over in front of her house, and put the truck in Park. She looked at the For Sale sign in her yard, thinking how much her life had changed in the past two and a half years. Glancing in her visor mirror, she liked her reflection, which exuded confidence and calmness, two traits she once thought she'd never possess again. She looked back at Penny. "Oh Penny! I forgot to show you something!"

Annie reached into a bag on the passenger seat. She pulled out a sign that read: "This is Our Happy Place! Annie & Penny."

"What do you think? Do you like it?" she asked the dog.

Penny's stubby tail wagged like a flag on a blustery day. "Thought so," said Annie.

She put the truck in Drive and pulled away from the curb, got on the highway, and headed southbound.

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