

The Best Day

It was raining. A slow, chilly, miserable drizzle soaked the trees, the beach, everything. Droplets ran down the window like tears.

Her face downcast, her eyes moist, Dora stood staring at the gray-green ocean waves lapping at the shore. She longed to dig her toes into the sand, to feel its gritty roughness and the coolness below the hot surface. Her sigh was like a soft sob. The sound tore through Paul like a knife in his heart.

How he loved this woman. He had since the first time he saw her in the student union both of them working their way through at Earlham College. Dora wore no make-up; her hands enclosed in latex gloves and her hair was tied in a low ponytail under her hairnet. Sensing his eyes on her, she looked up and smiled. Petite and willowy, she appeared even younger than her 18 years. Paul's breath caught in his throat. Hoping she couldn't tell how awkward he felt, he managed a foolish grin. It had taken him three weeks to muster the courage to ask her out. He stammered his invitation. The words tumbled out of him as she gazed at him quizzically. He couldn't believe she said yes. That night after taking her home, he knew she would be his wife.

Through the thick fog, the shore was a hazy, vague outline beyond the hotel parking lot. Watching Dora at the window made Paul want to cry. His heart breaking, he flipped the pages of his novel slowly while he peered at her over the top of the book. Giddy with anticipation and excitement, he had sprung his surprise on her as they drove away from the reception. The line of empty aluminum cans his best man had attached clanged behind Paul's 20-year-old Chevy. The limo he had hoped to hire for their trip was disappointingly beyond his means. No matter. Dora said she was just as happy as if he were a millionaire. He knew she was telling the truth but still longed to give her the best.

Turning in the passenger seat, Dora stared at him, her mouth agape. "Hilton Head? Really?" she said, her eyes widening. "I always want to go there. I never thought it would happen."

Paul grinned at his new bride. "It's my wedding gift to you, Mrs. Davis." He reached over and squeezed her hand. Mrs. Dora Davis. He loved the sound of it. Now she belonged to him. His wife, his love, his world.

"I love you, Paul," Dora said. Leaning over, she kissed him, causing them both to gasp as he swerved precariously toward the ditch. "Sorry, dear," Dora murmured. Fumbling with the radio until she found some soft music, Dora leaned back in her seat, a dreamy smile crossing her face. "I want to run barefoot on the beach and feel the warm sand between my toes and the sun on my back." Since the day Paul proposed, she had dreamed of her honeymoon with her new husband.

Her enthusiasm was contagious, making him all but forget the sacrifice it had cost him to make her dream come true. Throughout their brief engagement, she spoke of little else.

The rain started when they crossed the line into South Carolina. "It's just a quick band," he said hopefully, touching her hand. Not speaking, she leaned forward and stared through the windshield. By the time they reached Hilton Head, it had slowed to a cold drizzle.

Sometime in the night, Paul felt his bride arise. He watched through half-closed eyes as she pulled back the heavy drapes. In the light from the bathroom, he saw her sad expression. The rain still fell the next morning. As famished, as they were dejected, the newlyweds found a small restaurant down the street. Wincing at the prices, they settled on a breakfast of two eggs, sausage, and toast. The waitress frowned when they asked for an extra plate. Returning to their room, Paul tried to persuade Dora to put on her bathing suit. "Maybe later," she said, her voice flat.

Paul had saved enough to pay for just two days at the Hilton. There was nothing for extras. The small refrigerator in their room was well stocked, but anything they took from it would show up on their bill. Dora sighed as she opened the appliance's door and stared longingly at the snacks and soft drinks. Closing it softly, she stepped into the bathroom. Water ran from the faucet into the plastic glass. Paul's heart sank. Was this the way their married life would be, a couple of paupers stumbling around in a rich man's world and facing one disappointment after another? Lying on the bed, Paul's veins burned with shame as he realized his over-ambitious pretense. Who was he kidding? He pretended to read the John McDonald novel a previous guest had left behind. The pages blurred until he laid it aside.

Paul had wanted to give Dora the best life, starting with their honeymoon. Before their wedding he spent hours looking through magazines, mooning over vacation spots of the rich and famous. Calculating how much he would need for a decent honeymoon, he almost regretted Dora's accepting his proposal. He couldn't afford even a tenth of what well-off people spent on a room for one night. Begging for overtime at the college, he was rewarded with a few hours' worth. He scrimped and scraped from everywhere. Still, not enough.

Aware of the couple's financial straits, their pastor graciously waived his fee for performing the wedding ceremony. Members of the congregation decorated the church. The Ladies Missionary Society catered the meal and even provided a beautiful, three-tiered cake complete with a bride and groom topper.

Dora didn't know but would find out later that Paul had sold his guitar to pay for their stay at the hotel. He bought the Gibson when he was 16 after working all summer putting up hay. That guitar went everywhere with him. On their first date, he serenaded Dora with it. Starry-eyed, she listened intently, awed by his talent. She asked him to play at their wedding. No. Now he would make music only for her. Dora would be crushed if she knew the guitar was in the hands of a 12-year-old girl three states away.

Dora stepped out of the bathroom, sniffing and fighting back tears. The bed sagged. Laying the book on the bedside table, Paul turned over and took her in his arms. Her resolve loosening, Dora began to quietly weep. Saying nothing, he held her, caressing her hair until she slept. He prayed silently, asking the Lord for a miracle. An idea came to him. He could ask. The worst they could do was say no. Gently, so as not to wake her, he laid Dora's head on the pillow and stood at the bedside watching her sleep. Surely it was not possible for a man to love his wife more than he did Dora.

Paul closed the door softly behind him. Riding down in the elevator, he rehearsed his speech, grasping his hands together to keep them from trembling. His knees wobbled as he crossed the lobby. He almost turned back. No! No matter how humiliating, he must do this for the woman he loved. The front desk clerk looked up. "May I speak with the manager, please?"

"Certainly, sir. Is everything satisfactory?"

"Ah, yes, yes everything is fine," Paul stammered.

The man stepped away from his station and returned shortly, followed by a distinguished-looking, well-dressed man who smiled and held out his hand. "I'm Stevenson Hollister, the hotel manager. How may I help you?" The man's suit cost more than Paul's car. He felt shabby and small in his thrift store clothing.

Hollister knew all his guests, the wealthy ones as well as those who had saved for a year to spend a few days in his hotel. He smiled and waited patiently for the young man's reply. Losing his courage, Paul faltered. He opened and closed his mouth, finally managing to mumble, "I...I'm sorry I bothered you." He turned to go back to his room.

"Please, Mr. Davis, why don't we step into my office so we can speak privately?"

Meekly, Paul followed him down a hallway. Hollister opened the door to an office almost as large as the apartment where Paul and Dora would live in Richman, Indiana

As soon as the manager closed the door, Paul blurted out, "I don't have much money!" He fumbled in the pocket of his jeans, pulled out an embarrassingly small wad of bills and laid it on the gleaming desk.

Sitting down behind the desk, Hollister opened a book with a green cover. "Mr. Davis, I see your room was paid for in advance." He glanced up to see tears forming in the corners of Paul's eyes.

"Yes, the room is paid for, but I wanted to rent one of those little tents on the beach," Paul answered, lowering his head as he tried to collect himself.

"Little tents? Oh, you mean a cabana," Hollister corrected with a gentle smile.

"Cabana, yes," Paul felt his face redden. "You see, Dor...my wife, works as in server the cafeteria at our college and I'm a janitor there. So we didn't have much money for our

honeymoon and I sold my guitar just to be able to afford two nights here and..."

Hollister saw the tears about to spill over and understood. In his mind, the kind hotel manager traveled back to when he too was a penniless newlywed. He and his young bride had started on a road trip with just a few dollars between them. They coasted into Garden City Kansas on fumes. He worked at a mom and pop store sweeping the floor until they had enough to continue their journey. Hollister made a decision. Stepping around the desk, he laid his hand on the young man's shoulder. "I see. You want the extras."

"Y...yes." Paul's face flamed. "I can't pay you now. But, if we could work out a payment plan, I would gladly pay you back. In a year or two?"

Hollister leaned over and looked at his book again. "I see you're registered in one of our honeymoon suites?"

"Yes," Paul answered tensely. "Is...is that a problem?"

"Oh, no, on the contrary. It's very beneficial for you and your bride, because all the amenities and meals are included in the price of the room. You're welcome to dine in the restaurant and order anything on the menu. Or if you wish, you may order from room service." Paul's mouth dropped. He didn't remember seeing anything like this in the brochure. "Everything the hotel offers is included in the price of your room," Hollister assured him. "And you're free to use the cabanas at any time." Paul could only stare in disbelief. The hotel manager continued. "Perhaps you were unaware of our inclement weather policy for newlyweds. You are permitted to stay two extra days. If you so please."

"Yes. Yes!" His face breaking out in a smile, Paul grabbed Hollister's hand and pumped it. "We can absolutely stay! You don't know what this means to me, sir."

Hollister's smile told Paul what he was thinking: Oh, yes, my young friend, I do. "As for the cabana, please let any member of the staff know when you'd like to reserve one." "Is it too late to reserve one for later today? Say in an hour?" Paul held his breath.

"I believe that can be arranged."

"Thank you, Mr. Hollister. Thank you so much." Paul turned to leave.

"There's just one thing," Hollister said.

The young man's face fell. He knew it was too good to be true. The manager had been making fun of him. None of what he told him was true. In school, the bullies had pulled pranks on him, but of all the suffering he had endured, this was the cruelest. He turned stiffly to face the man, ready to absorb any ridicule he would heap on him. Whatever mockery he would receive for Dora's sake, Paul vowed never to reveal it to her.

Smiling, Hollister held out the few dollars Paul had placed on his desk. Weak with relief, Paul took the bills and stuffed them into his pocket. "I'll see that cabana number four is available for you and Mrs. Davis within the hour," Hollister said. "Please enjoy your stay, and if there's anything else you need, don't hesitate to call." He handed Paul an embossed business card.

Paul stumbled through the lobby, followed by the stares of bemused fellow guests. By the time he reached the elevator he had recovered and, too excited to wait for the pokey conveyance, he fairly flew up the stairs.

Stevenson Hollister stepped to the front desk. "Mr. Norris, about the young man who just left my office."

"Yes sir?" Norris replied with a slight smile.

"Please mark his bill paid in full and put his other charges on my account."

"Yes sir."

The two men exchanged knowing smiles. Unbeknownst to corporate, Hollister's largesse was extended to dreamy-eyed newlyweds several times a year.

Winded from climbing the stairs, Paul burst through the door to their suite, startling his bride. Awakened from her sorrowful sleep, Dora sat bolt upright. Breathless, Paul panted, "Darling, I have great news."

"What is it? Tell me quick," Dora said, her eyes wide.

"Everything is paid for. The cabana, our meals, even the stuff in the refrigerator."

"What? How is that possible?"

"I talked to the hotel manager. Everything's included in the price of the room. And because of the rain, we can stay 'til Friday!"

Dora leaned her head against Paul's chest and began to sob. But her tears of sorrow now became tears of joy. She lifted her head and met Paul's gaze with a brilliant smile. He thought it was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Maybe this was their turning point. The prospect of one disaster after another following them through life had vanished.

"Let's celebrate," Dora said. Jumping up from the bed, she went to refrigerator and took out two small ice cream cakes and two cans of soda. Seated at the table by the window, they watched the

rain with a new perspective. Paul leaned over and kissed the ice cream mustache off Dora's upper lip. She giggled. Their eyes locked and his heart almost burst. He didn't think he could love her more than he did at this moment. The years ahead would prove him wrong. Forty-five minutes later, the two ran barefoot down the beach in the light shower.

Watching them from the window of his office, Hollister smiled. "So much in love," he said softly. Stepping to his desk, he picked up the phone and dialed room service. "John, a couple will be dining shortly in cabana number four. Please make sure they understand they may order whatever they wish. Yes, charge it to their room."

As Paul and Dora reached the cabana, the rain stopped. Seconds later the sun emerged from behind the clouds. A radiant rainbow spread across the sky, its ends seemingly anchored in the blue-green ocean. The waves lapping at the beach sounded to them as sweet as any love song.

"Look dear, God is smiling down on us," Dora said, her face lighting up with a gorgeous smile.

"He certainly is, sweetheart. He certainly is." Taking his bride in his arms, Paul kissed her.

Fifty-five years later

The frail elderly woman sat next to the elegant casket caressing its golden oak finish. She smiled through her tears at the young couple standing before her. Newly married and so much in love, they reminded Dora of her and her husband. She sent a silent prayer to heaven that they would never lose their passion for each other.

They had stopped by the funeral home on their way to a couples' retreat. He was a rising star in the corporate world, she a budding social butterfly. They came to pay their respects to the ones they looked up to as an example of a perfect marriage. "What is your happiest memory?" the wife asked, her face radiant.

With a whimsical smile, Dora thought of the financial struggles. The electronics business they built at night in the garage of their ramshackle rental home. The mistakes and missteps leading to the company's going national, then global a few years later. Their trips abroad, staying at the most beautiful hotels. Dancing under the stars in Paris with her beloved husband. The births of their three children. The magnificent home Paul built for her at the edge of their private lake. All the laughter and the good times.

"Oh, my dear, in our fifty-five years together there are so many," Dora said, her face shining.

"But I think the most memorable, the best time was when we were on our honeymoon at Hilton Head." Quietly recounting how a kind hotel manager took pity on a penniless couple, tears misted her eyes as she said simply, "That was the best."

The young couple went away astonished. How could this wealthy widow believe the best time of

her life was when she and her husband were dirt poor? How could that be better than the limos, the big house and all the other luxuries only the wealthy could afford? Watching them leave, Dora prayed they would learn the secret to true happiness as she and Paul had.

The next morning Dora arose to a silent, lonely house. The children had returned to their own homes to live their lives until they too would face a day such as this. She had given the staff the day off. She wanted to be alone with the memory of the one her heart longed for, the one who had devoted his life to her.

Hobbling on her cane, Dora made her way to the small room at the back of the house where the view of the lake was unobstructed. The secluded nook held so many happy memories. Seated on the reupholstered couch they brought from their first apartment, she thumbed through the family photo album until she found the picture of a smiling young couple on the beach. Tracing her husband's face with a trembling finger, she whispered, "Yes, my dear, that was the best day."

The End