

Hank Leaves His Wife

Hank frequently stopped at Betty's Stanwood Diner in Stanwood, Washington for a piece of pie and a cup of coffee when on the way to get parts or have farm equipment serviced at the John Deere dealership in Mt. Vernon. He ran a large dairy operation in the Stillaguamish River Valley south of town and was a loyal Green Tractor owner. Hank was in his early seventies and enjoyed sitting in the old diner early in the morning with other farmers whose wives no longer got up to fix their breakfasts early in the day.

On this day, however, he and Marge were on their way back from a midmorning appointment they had been to with an oncologist at Skagit Valley Hospital in Mt. Vernon. They were both worried and thinking deeply about the diagnosis she had received about cancer that needed treatment. Neither had spoken as they drove in the old farm truck from Mt. Vernon to Stanwood.

As they entered Stanwood Hank asked, "Would you like to stop at Betty's Diner and have a piece of pie and coffee?"

Marge responded, "That would be nice."

Hank pulled into his usual parking space and waited for his wife to join him in the diner. He led her to a quiet corner where they could have more privacy to talk. Normally he would sit at the counter and talk with the other farmers about the weather and the price of milk, but there were few other farmers in the diner at this time of the day and he figured Marge might want to talk.

Betty came over to their table and asked, "What would you all like, Hank?"

" I think I'll just have a piece of blueberry pie and a cup of coffee, black, Betty. How about you, Marge? "

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe just a cup of decaf with a little cream. Thanks."

Betty responded, " You sure you don't want a piece of blueberry pie? It was made fresh this morning with blueberries from the Soggy Bottom Farm. "

"No thanks. I'm not very hungry this morning," Marge replied.

" Okay, one piece of blueberry pie and two coffees coming up. "

Hank toyed with his empty coffee cup while waiting for Betty to return. Neither spoke. After a few minutes Betty returned with Hank's pie, filled both their cups with coffee, and said, "Enjoy," as she returned to the kitchen.

Hank ate his pie slowly as Marge sipped her coffee. Hank started to say something to her but hesitated because he couldn't think how to start the conversation. He finished his coffee and said to Marge, "I'll be back. I just need to use the restroom.

Hank entered the toilet near the front door and spent a good five minutes at the urinal, as usual. When he returned to the cash register near the front door he laid down a five-dollar bill on the counter and walked out the door to his truck. He got in, as usual, and drove toward home along the Old Pioneer Highway he had driven for over fifty years.

He turned off the State road onto the County road to his farm and drove another five miles before turning into the drive to his farm. He parked in his usual spot next to the milk shed and walked through the mud room into the kitchen.

" Hey, Marge, I'm home! " he yelled. No response. He yelled again, "I'm home, Hon, What's for lunch?" Still no response.

Then it hit him. He had left Marge in the diner! Oh, Lord, what have I done? What will she think? Now what do I do? I'd better get back there before she realizes I left her!

He ran out to his truck, jumped in, and raced down the road to town. After several near collisions, he arrived at the diner. Hank rushed through the entrance to the back corner of the diner, only to find the table where he and Marge had been seated, empty! "Where is she?" he said audibly.

Hank walked quickly to the kitchen and peered in, looking for Betty. She was just coming out with an armful of meals for the lunch crowd.

"Have you seen my wife, Betty!" he blurted out.

"She left about twenty minutes ago, with your son, John," she said.
"Something about you leaving her. Is that right, Hank? Have you decided to leave Marge? "

" It was just an accident, Betty. I forgot she was with me when I left here earlier. "

"You forgot your wife? I wouldn't want to be in your shoes. You'd better plan on a big make-up gift, Hank. "

Hank hung his head as he walked out the door of the restaurant. He slowly climbed into his truck and sat staring out the window.

"What do I do now," Hank thought to himself. After a few minutes he started up the old truck and slowly reversed his route back home. He reluctantly drove the Old Pioneer Highway south, onto the County road, and into his driveway. As he approached the house he noticed his son's newer farm truck in front, and his daughter's car nearby.

Hank stopped and considered what to do. He turned off the engine and watched the house. Nobody appeared to be leaving. After about an hour he started the engine again, backed down the drive where he could turn around, and drove to the old Lutheran church where he and Marge attended. He drove into the parking lot and sat considering what had happened to him and Marge.

"Marge has been a good wife. She's stuck with me through thick and thin, " he thought. "She supported me when we almost lost the farm twenty years ago. She finally forgave me when I forgot our anniversary five years ago. Would she be able to forgive me for leaving her at the diner? It's a toss-up, " he finally decided.

Hank sat there stewing about what he had done all afternoon until it got dark. He slowly drove back home and approached his house with the lights off. He could see that his kids had gone home leaving Marge alone. He watched the house until the bedroom lights went out about ten o'clock.

He sat there considering what to do. He couldn't just sneak back into the house. It didn't seem right, even if it was his house and she was his wife. So, he curled up in the seat and fell asleep.

The next morning, Hank woke up about six, his usual time, and drove slowly up to the house and got out. He walked quietly through the mud room and peered around the corner to see Marge standing at the sink looking out the window.

Hank walked over next to her and said quietly, "I'm sorry I forgot you yesterday. Can you forgive me."

Marge turned to him, kissed him on the cheek, and said, "What would you like for breakfast?"

(Adapted from a story by Garrison Keillor)