

# Going Home

By Lori Hicks

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I met the love of my life when I was eighteen years old. I often teased her about robbing the cradle. Gladys was twenty when she captured my heart. She had the wholesome face of a church choir soloist, paired with a voluptuous body that attracted attention. Why she was ever attracted to a tall, scrawny, freckle-faced kid like me, I'll never know. Immediately after falling in love with Gladys, I went off to war and served my country. I flew more than fifty missions over Germany. Made lots of friends in the war, friends I no longer have, friends that never made it back. Came home two years later, married my sweet Gladys, and then we started our family.

My wife gave me two wonderful sons whom we of course had baptized Catholic. That was one of the things that attracted me to Gladys. She was a good Catholic girl. Like me she knew to make the sign of the cross when she heard sirens, or as we drove past a church and even a hospital. Joseph and Jacob turned out to be really great sons. Joseph was tall like me. His hair was rusty red and his face was spotted like mine at his age. Joseph was an athlete, excelling in most sports. Jacob on the other hand, he was more like his mother. His skin was pale, his features soft and smooth, like you would imagine a male angel might look. Being born premature, Jacob didn't get the strong start Joseph did. He was diminutive in comparison to his older brother. He never stood a chance as an athlete. Lord knows I tried. Maybe that's why he was so fascinated with music and dance. Now and again I look back at my life and I ask myself, where did it all go? Why did it have to go so fast? Yet I now question, why can't I get it to go any faster?

Gladys was a wonderful mother. She raised our children to understand right from wrong and gave them a sense of responsibility toward one another, toward other human beings. We never raised a hand to our boys and only occasionally raised our voice. She instilled in them

kindness, a certain gentleness that radiated from both my sons. Being a great wife wouldn't even begin to describe my Gladys. She never complained when I worked late or played hard with the guys. I always had a warm dinner waiting for me no matter what time I walked through the door, and I left the house every morning with a full belly and a farewell kiss. A person could eat off the floors in our house. And Gladys always managed to surround us with beautiful things, even on the pitiful salary I brought home. We always had fresh flowers in the vase on our dining table, and the vegetables came right out of the garden Gladys tended. I can still smell the pleasant aroma of our home.

I hated that Gladys was the one that got the call. I especially hated that I wasn't home with her at the time. Joseph, our eldest, our prized college athlete, my strapping young son had been killed in an auto accident on his twenty-first birthday. Not his fault. For years though, we thought it was ours. Good ole' Catholic guilt. Jacob had just turned eighteen and was going off to college when his brother Joseph was killed. Our relationship was good when Jacob left home. Yet he went away our loving son, and it seemed a stranger returned in his place. Jacob was somehow different when he came back from college, or was he always different and I only noticed it upon his homecoming. He didn't spend much time at the house. He and his mother did talk on the telephone regularly. He and Gladys were always real close. Was I that judgmental?

It wasn't until years later that he came back around his family. But when he finally returned, Jacob never left his mother's side. Both he and his partner Michael were there until the end. They cooked for us, they cleaned, they did the laundry, the yard work, and they shopped and even helped with the bills when I could no longer afford things. Who would have thought a war veteran who had worked his whole life would need the help of his children in his later years. Jacob and Michael were the family I really needed, they became the friends I no longer had, and

the best caregivers to my beloved wife. After Gladys was diagnosed with terminal cancer she only lived six months. For Gladys, I am sure those were six very long, grueling months. I hated seeing her suffer as she faded away. She left me after forty-five years of marriage. At least I wasn't alone any longer, I now felt like I had two sons again. I had Jacob and Michael. Those two men were not just sons to me we had developed a wonderful friendship.

Then unexpectedly they, too, were suddenly taken from me. They called it a hate crime. There was no previous argument between these individuals, there was no previous fight, and there was no bad blood, in fact they didn't even know their killer. I was told the suspect took a handgun, and at close range shot and killed Jacob and Michael. He did it for the sole reason he didn't care for their sexual preference. Neither Jacob nor Michael ever told me they were gay. They never said it in so many words. But I knew.

I could certainly comprehend someone not understanding it, being gay. Some people had a real problem with the way others lived. Some people even think God would have been okay with a couple of "Queer-Boys" they called em', being killed. But I could not grasp their getting murdered for being gay. My first thought was, oh my God, please help me. But then after all the years of being a good Christian I questioned even that. My God, that is. I was staggered that the God I knew would allow something like that to happen. Two fine young men gunned down for loving one another.

Now with all the years behind me, and all the memories, good and bad, all I can do is lie in this bed alone and lonely. I am in a place filled with strange people, strange noises and strange smells, being cared for by individuals who know nothing about me. I had a family whom I have outlived. I had friends throughout my lifetime that all went before me. My eyes can no longer see

and I can barely hear. Lately I've heard Gladys talking to me, though. And recently I have even smelled the sweetness of her perfume. I've been dreaming a lot about my boys, all *three* of them. I really miss them, and my family and friends who have gone before me.

Suddenly I hear someone walk through the door to my room, and a soft voice echoes out of my darkness.

"Hi Mr. Shaffer. My name is Grace," she said. "I'm with hospice. I want you to know I am here with you. You are not alone."

I felt the warm touch of an angel as her hand lay on my shoulder. I knew it was my Gladys. Leave it to her to name my angel, Grace. That was just like my sweet love.

"It is okay to let go Mr. Shaffer. It is okay to go home. You're no longer alone," she said, reassuring me.

I could hear the beeping monitors at the head of my bed. I felt myself jerking at my covers. All of a sudden I could see Gladys. She looked as beautiful as the day I met her. Her heartwarming smile once again takes hold of me. Why do I see her so vividly? How did she get here? Why is she suddenly calling me to her? Gladys has her arms wide open.

"It's alright Mr. Shaffer. I'm here with you." The angel's voice began to fade.

And then I see my sons. I see my friends. They are calling me home. I reach out to Gladys and she takes my hand as she had so many times before.