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Of Wine and Aging

A fictional essay by Robert Lipkin

Last night Sylvia and I celebrated our sixtieth wedding anniversary. Before dinner, my son Philip pulled me aside and asked me whether I was happy with my life. I told him the truth: "What the hell is happiness? I'm happy your mother and I are still alive and that the roof doesn't leak. Honestly, I'm beginning to wonder whether God forgot where he left us."

The question was an insult. The boy looked at me like...well, like if I told him, 'I'm happy,' it would change his life. Believe me, my happiness won't change his life. About fifteen years ago, Philip called me one afternoon and told me he and Natalie decided to separate. "The situation isn't good for the girls," he told me. "They see us fighting all the time."

"So why do you think God invented doors?" I told him.

I thought that was good advice then. Still do. I insisted we meet for dinner that night to talk about it.

When I told Sylvia the news, she wanted details. I told her I'd learn more after meeting with Philip for dinner at the Wine Cellar. What advice could I have given him that might have saved his marriage? I didn't expect my life to be easy so I wasn't disappointed when it wasn't. When I got married, it was for life. Every time somebody strikes a match, you can't go running for a fire exit. My wife and me - we fight all the time. We still can't tell mountains from molehills. But we climb them together, one at a time.

At the Wine Cellar, I told the waiter, "Give us a bottle of wine and two glasses. I already had dinner - better than you can make here." After some small talk, I asked Philip directly, "Did she catch you with someone?"

"No. There's nobody else," he said. "It just didn't work."

I wasn't going home to Sylvia without some information so I asked him again, "Your mother wants to know what went wrong."

"This is why I didn't want to meet you," he whined. "How can I make you understand? Shakespeare wrote that the grape ripens on the vine until it rots. Tell Mom our grapes aren't ripening any more."

After a few sips of his wine, Philip asked me, "Why does your marriage work?"

"I have no idea," I told him. "I don't examine it. I know nothing about electricity, but when I flip the switch, the lights go on. Who cares how it works."

"Fine," he snapped back at me. "Tell Mom when I flip the switch, there's no electricity."

After some more prodding, Philip told me this: "I won't share the intimate details of my marriage. I'll paint a picture for you with color and shading but without brush strokes."

Holding up his wine glass, Philip poured out his marital details: "I have this wonderful glass of wine. Good vintage. Honestly, I don't yearn for either a better or a different wine. My glass is almost entirely filled, yet I can't get my eyes off the unfilled portion."

When we got home, I gave Sylvia verbatim everything I'd learned: "He has fine wine. He likes it. And, then again, he wants a new bottle, maybe just a few more grapes. No, no, I think he said that some of the grapes he wants are still on the vine. Yeah, this is important. Somehow, Shakespeare predicted that Philip's marriage was rotting. I'm a little hazy on that part. Okay, I got it. Philip's separating because he needs to fill his glass. Actually, he made more sense when he was a baby."

By the time I finished, Philip was already in his car backing out of our driveway. Philip and I disappointed each other that night. Love survives anything but disappointment.

Last week Philip told us his second marriage had ended. No details offered. None asked.

"Marriage, boy, is such a joy,
so lovely a condition,
That many ask no better than:
To wed as often as they can,
In happy repetition."

Richard Wilbur lyrics from
Broadway Musical "Candide"

But last night, during dinner, when Philip was refilling his wine glass, I was reminded of his marital difficulties with that beverage. "Philip," I asked him, "without getting into your particulars - the darks, the lights and the brush strokes - did your second marriage also fail because your wine glass wasn't filled to the brim?"

In a surprisingly mellow, subdued tone Philip confessed, "I still can't seem to fill my glass to the brim."

I asked Philip to join me in the kitchen and told him to bring his wine with him. I got a juice glass from the cabinet and placed it on the kitchen table. I poured the contents from Philip's large wine goblet into the smaller juice glass. The juice glass quickly filled with sparkling red wine, but I kept pouring. The wine spilled over the brim of the glass onto the white Formica kitchen table and then onto the tile floor. Philip looked puzzled, but I had his full attention now. With the results of my demonstration still dripping onto the floor, I offered him the following advice: "Perhaps your habitual marital misfortunes could be avoided, metaphorically speaking, if you'd just consider using a smaller glass."

If I live to be a hundred, I won't forget the look of wonder written on Philip's face as he watched how easily his cup could be manipulated to runneth over. And that little experiment in my kitchen just about sums up all I know about marriage that's worth telling. **g**

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