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Only death could divide the Borons

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JACKSON TWP. -- In the evenings, Virginia Boron sits in her favorite old brown chair. The foam inside peaks through a ripped cover just below the seat.

Her husband, Leo, used to sit across from her.

Everyone called him Lee.

They'd sit together for hours. He'd watch TV. She'd work on her crossword puzzles or read books, usually a good mystery. They had a routine. They were married for 63 years.

Earlier this year, Lee died. Virginia still lives in the house they shared. It's the same house Lee built — it took him about seven years. It was his first and only effort. It's the same Frank Avenue NW house where they raised eight children.

And it's still home.

It's been three months since Lee died.

Virginia still "talks" to him.

"Usually, it's at night, when I'm saying the rosary," she said. "I say I miss him and why did he have to do that ... why did he have to die?"

Still, she said, it was time.

On a Thursday night in January, Lee had a stroke in his favorite chair. He couldn't breathe on his own, and he was paralyzed. She knew he wouldn't want to live like that.

The next night, about 18 members of the Boron family crowded into a hospital intensive care room to say goodbye. Virginia held one of their grandsons in her lap on one side of the bed. Their daughter, Mary, held a great-grandson on the other side of the bed. All four held Lee's hands.

Her family surrounded her in the weeks after Lee died. Someone was always stopping to spend the day or keep her company for a few hours. She figures they were worried.

“People do strange things,” Virginia said. “Maybe they wanted to make sure I wasn’t going to hold a gun to my head ... I don’t even know how to hold a gun.”

Virginia is getting better.

She’s 84 years old, and she works out three times a week. She and Mary are planning to remodel. They want to patch cracks in the walls and ceilings and buy new furniture.

“Lee and I always talked about it,” Virginia said.

And she has her kittens.

About a week after Lee died, she got two. The grandkids named them Lilly and Bailey. Virginia got them to keep her company, but they also keep mice away.

“I had to get them,” she said. “Lee’s the one who always set the trap. He was getting a mouse a day. I don’t know how to set the traps.”

There’s a lot Virginia never learned; she never had to. Lee always was there. He’d tighten the lids on the jars of jelly she made. He’d take care of the bills.

“He could do anything,” she said.

One thing Lee wasn’t though, was romantic. At least that’s what Virginia would like everyone to believe. But their daughter, Mary, knows better.

Virginia had open heart surgery two years ago. Lee, whose eyes were bad, had lost his license a few months earlier. But he pushed himself to take the driver’s test, hoping to get his license back, so he could visit her in the hospital.

“He failed,” Mary said.

His family drove him to the hospital instead.

When Virginia came out of surgery, Mary watched her father lean over and whisper into her mom’s ear. He was telling her how much he loved her.

“You didn’t know it, but I was whispering sweet nothings in your ear,” Lee told Virginia later.

Mary also has seen two stacks of long-hidden love letters from Lee to Virginia. Virginia didn’t want her kids to see them, because she admits they’re pretty mushy. They’re neatly tied with string. The envelopes are yellow and crumbling.

“I wanted to tear them up,” Virginia said.

There are about 75 letters, written when the couple was courting in 1936 and 1937. Lee was in Miami much of that time, working on a farm, trying to save money.

Virginia wanted to be a nurse when she met Lee. Her best friend was Lee’s cousin. She was a senior in the now-closed St. John’s high school.

“I wasn’t too impressed at first,” she said.

Neither were her parents.

“They thought he drank too much,” she said.

But he grew on her. They had to wait until she was 21, so they wouldn’t need her parents’ permission to get married. They didn’t wait long.

“Five days after I turned 21,” she said.

The couple struggled in the early days. They moved from one apartment to the next. He was a machinist at Jackson-Bayley. Virginia was a housewife. Finally, they bought an acre on Frank Avenue, part of the family farm.

Lee hauled discarded tiles he used to cover the walls of the basement home he’d started building in the 1940s. He added on to the home later. Virginia tried to stretch the few dollars they had. She made clothes for all of the children.

“We may have been ragamuffins, but we were clean ragamuffins,” Mary said.

Raising eight kids is a lot of work.

“I was pregnant or nursing for 20 years,” Virginia said.

When the kids got older, Virginia and Lee would go square dancing on Saturday nights. They bowled together. And in the summer, she'd often put a pot of beans on the stove on Saturday nights. After church the next morning, they'd take their 14-foot boat on a fishing trip with the kids. They ate hot dogs and beans for lunch.

When the kids moved out, Lee and Virginia took long summer trips. They drove to Florida, California, Canada. Lee did most of the driving. "I drove a little," Virginia said. "When he'd stop at the gas station, I'd sit in the driver's seat and wouldn't get up."

Boxes of slides from those trips lay on a table in the basement, next to Lee's workshop, an old boat motor, a garbage disposal. Virginia said he never threw anything away.

A month before he died, Lee was in the basement, watching those slides on a movie screen. Mary said she thinks he knew the end was coming soon.

The day the family buried Lee, a family member noticed a rainbow over their home. Virginia said she's pretty sure he was trying to give her a sign from above.

"I figure he was up there," she said.

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