

# Don't Leave Me

by Kris Towell

That smell. It was more than just the typical country smell of manure, hogs, fresh air, and growing things. Perhaps the smell wasn't it at all, nor the familiar landscape. No, it was more of a feeling, a sensation that grew stronger with every mile. As Anne veered to the right and exited from the highway, she left behind the selfish world of frustration and disappointment — took it off and laid it aside. At the same time, something inside her sprang to life — a refreshed energy, a renewed youth, a faithful security. She was home.

Each curve and rise in the road was impressed in her brain. Whizzing along the narrow roads, she looked out across the low fields with their tiny green shoots. How vulnerable they were. This was "lake country"; every spring, the rains flooded miles of farms, joining them into one giant, brown, flowing body. In the good years when the rains were moderate, the entire county transformed into the promised land. "No better soil in the state," her father always bragged. The land shared its richness with her, for her roots were still firmly planted here. This was where it had all started.

The song on the radio reminded Anne of beginnings, that his roots were here too; this was "their" song. The static of the radio's poor reception annoyed her, though, so she turned it off. Readjusting the rearview mirror, Anne caught sight of herself. She was surprised that the residue of her morning's experiment with a new beauty creme still persisted. It was supposed to subtract ten years from her complexion, but its only youthful evidence was her greasy T-zone. She found a pink tissue in the glove compartment and rubbed her forehead hard; the familiar, fine creases trailed behind. No amount of washing and no magic cremes could erase the wrinkles that emanated from her eyes like the spokes of a wheel, the wisps of gray that frosted her temples and forehead. All her life people had guessed her to be at least five years younger than her actual age — but now she felt old, against her will. And she resented it.

Before, aging had never really bothered Anne. In fact, she had looked forward to the time when the kids would be grown, when the college loans and the mortgage would be paid in full, when she and Frank could begin the life **they** had skimmed and saved for. But **they** was now **she**, who would go on skimping through her retirement, unable to afford a trip to visit her grandchildren in the next state, let alone passage on a Caribbean cruiseliner. He had taken it all — the money, yes, but worse, the dreams.

She wished he had died.

Most people misunderstood her sentiments, amazed that the situation could have made her so bitter that she would wish him dead. No, she intended nothing malicious; after all, she still loved him. For that reason, she could have accepted death much easier

than divorce. Death didn't threaten her womanhood, her self-worth. But instead of dying, he had become young again, or tried to. How sad, he thought he was happy. How sad, she never could be. It was she who had died.

The green sign at the edge of the road turned her thoughts to other things. Eminence. A rise of ground. This town, from which one could look out and see the community's wealth of farmland, was appropriately named. Quickly, Anne passed through its center in her haste to reach home; the changes taking place here disturbed her. In an attempt to modernize, the town was losing its relaxed, comfortable character. When Anne started her first job after high school at the bank, everything was done by hand. Now the faded brick building had a newly installed electronic teller machine. The recently renovated grocery store, too, seemed to suffer from a bad face lift. What had been a simple three-story school house when Anne attended had quadrupled in size in order to continue its accommodation of all 12 grades; now it offered bus service. Even in the country, kids didn't walk to school any more but expected Mom to chauffeur them wherever they needed to go.

Her daughter Lisa was like that. Anne was glad Lisa involved herself in school activities, that she was fashionable and popular; still, Anne tired of having to pattern her own life around her daughter's. She was so demanding, concerned only with what she wanted to do, when she wanted to do it. Never did she consider others' feelings or plans; seldom did she exhibit any appreciation more than a hurried "thanks." Although Lisa refused to admit it, her temperament closely mimicked her father's; perhaps that was why Anne felt something special towards this child that she didn't for the others. Anne did her best to appease and gently condition what, after 30 years of marriage, she had not learned to change, trusting the chance that Lisa might yet grow out of, rather than into, that self-centered disposition.

Sometimes Anne wondered if she herself were the self-centered one, if she expected too much from others. Ambivalence baffled her. Like any good mother, she wanted success and happiness for her children; she knew they were busy with their own lives and was proud of what they had made of themselves. But they had inherited some of their parents' worst qualities, and that disappointed her. While she hated to admit it, part of her envied them the opportunities she had been denied or had failed to take advantage of. Passing the post office, she was reminded of the hurt she felt because they made no time in their lives for her.

Anne created a game of outwitting her children, testing the length of time it took them to initiate a communication. Once, she hadn't heard from them for over three months — no phone calls, no letters, nothing. Paranoia set in like the plague. She questioned: did they hate her? had they divorced her too as their father had? were they afraid to expose their children to her? She didn't mean to smother them, really she didn't. Lisa complained about her ridiculous behavior and told her to "lighten up," that they were just busy. Finally, she would break down and call them only to discover that they really



were just busy and had been meaning to call. Her grandkids, after much persuasion, cooed "I love you, Gran" to this voice they did not know and which really didn't know them. Lisa beamed "I told you so" and complained about being late again for some earth-shattering event. Anne tried to tolerate Lisa's complaining, for all too soon she would be gone, just busy — seeking out her own destiny and taking away her mother's. Anne would be alone. Laid off from her job as mother and fired from her job as wife, Anne's life would have no meaning. Charlie, the town drunk, waved to Anne and grinned. Poor Charlie, she thought — no meaning in his life either.

Anne left Charlie and the town behind her. Because the asphalt, poured to replace the gravel road years ago, was full of cracks and potholes caused by weather extremes and by the heavy farm machinery that traversed it daily, Anne came slowly upon the farm. Green pasture on one side, dotted with the few heads of black angus cattle that her father insisted on keeping, and the gentle woods on her other side embraced Anne and welcomed her home. Turning into the drive, she was greeted by the crumbling house and outbuildings. The foundation of the front porch sagged, and its screen was torn, allowing flies and wasps to creep through to their death on the sticky fly strip that hung there long after its capacity was exhausted and flies became white and petrified. The barn, too, with its weathered gray boards rotted into a sharp, yawning orifice around the door, had threatened to collapse for years. But something sustained them. Somehow, through whirlwind and blizzard, they endured, worn and shaken but still standing.

As Anne stepped out of the car, her father came out to meet her. Always, he met her at the door. It was a habit she had forced him to form. Her children scoffed at the thought, but as a child, Anne had been afraid of everything. Today, she would fight the Devil himself if she were in a hostile mood; then, though, fear consumed her. Her greatest terror renewed itself daily as she prepared for school. From the first grade through the third, Anne sobbed through the morning classes and sniffed through the afternoon. The problem was not school; she loved it and performed well. No, instead she feared that in her absence everyone would leave her. So, to reassure her, every day one of her parents, both having in childhood lost a parent and knowing how horrible that empty feeling could be, or one of her grandparents, who lived with the family and absolutely adored her, stood on the porch where she could see them as she came down the road and know everything was fine. It was an irrational fear, this extreme anxiety about being abandoned; most fears were. Anne wondered, though, if she had buried that fear all too soon.

There stood her father, the porch swaying beneath his weight. Seeing him made Anne feel like a little girl again. How she adored him. He was old, 75, but still thick and massive, his shoulders straining against the seams of his XXX Large blue cotton shirt. His washed-out overalls stretched taut across his stomach, so he left the side flaps unbuttoned to allow himself a little room. Anne's mother always scolded him for that because where his shirt ended, his rough

skin shone through. She was a modest woman and thought it rude for him to expose himself that way.

Because she was so modest, her affliction was even more difficult for her to bear. Anne found her mother seated on the adult potty chair conveniently placed beside her bed, struggling to fasten a button that had popped out of its stretched buttonhole at the neck of her soiled housedress. The constant trembling of her hands and body — a symptom of her Parkinson's disease — made it impossible for her to grasp anything firmly. Trickling down the dry skin of her unwashed face, a tear or two settled into the folds of her neck. Anne entered cheerfully, ignoring the tears. "Hello, Mother. Let me help you." After she had fastened the button and brushed through her mother's tangled hair, Anne left the room, following her father's subtle direction.

Shortly, he wheeled her out to the living room. Her mother refused to use the foot rests that attached to her wheelchair, so her feet and legs swelled like inflated balloons. An inflamed bed sore on her left ankle worried Anne, but her father seemed unconcerned, claiming he treated it as the doctor had ordered. When Anne picked up the dust rag or attempted to straighten the newspapers her father tossed behind his worn red recliner, both parents insisted she sit and visit. So she looked at the greeting cards they had received recently and talked with them of people in the community, prospects for a good crop, family, health, all the things that were important to them.

In a moment of silence, Anne's mother looked out the window and blurted, "Daniel! the cattle are out." Immediately, he turned to look, for occasionally the cattle did break through the electric wire that enclosed the pasture. Then he slowly turned, looked at Anne for an instant, and said to Ruth, rather gruffly, "Show me a cow!" She looked puzzled, as if she didn't know what he was asking, but the realization of her error — that there were no cattle loose — gradually spread across her face. Not daring to cry because Daniel had no patience with tears, Anne's mother just hung her head in shame. Awkwardly, they continued small talk briefly until it was time for Anne to return to the city to pick up Lisa. She felt relieved.

Good-byes were always difficult for Anne; today's incident made it even worse. Gently she rubbed her hand across her mother's hunched, bony back. Bending to kiss her forehead, Anne whispered "I love you, Mother." Now the older woman cried freely and babbled, "Don't leave me when I'm like this. I'll straighten up in a minute. I don't know what's come over me." Swallowing hard, Anne assured her that she would return soon; then she turned and walked out onto the lawn, followed by her father. He leaned on the open car door. "Sis," he said, "when she gets that way, I can hardly stand it. She doesn't know any better — it's the medicine you know — but I lose patience." The tired look in his gray eyes forced Anne to accept that he was truly old, in heart, now, as well as body. She knew she should support him now, try to alleviate his fears, but the right words could not slide past the lump that choked her. She had to get away. She had to leave. Offering to do whatever she could to help, Anne quickly squeezed



his square, rough hand; then she backed out of the driveway and waved good-bye.

When she was sure she was out of sight, Anne pulled to the side of the road. Tears blinded her. Thrashing through her purse, Anne found a crumpled pink tissue. She dabbed at her eyes and looked up, surprised to see the tiny, family cemetery upon the hill beside the road. She hadn't realized this was where she had stopped. Through a fresh stream of tears she pleaded, "Mother, Daddy, don't leave me."

