

## Just Fourteen Days

by Gayle Roper

*You can do it, Hal. You can, I told myself as I tucked my beach chair under my arm. Today is Saturday. We go home two weeks from today. Just fourteen days. That's not long. Nothing bad can happen in fourteen days.*

I wasn't certain I believed myself, so I quoted Patti's favorite verse, what she called the theme verse for parents of teenagers. *So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.*

*Don't think 24/7, I said in a self-directed pep talk.. Take it one day at a time.* I felt like I was the only attendee at one of those double letter meetings. "Hi, my name is Hal and I'm a worrier."

I looked at my much-loved family as we gathered on the porch of our four bedroom, second floor beachfront rental on Central in the 38<sup>th</sup> Street block in Ocean City, New Jersey. We'd come to Ocean City for vacation every year for as long as I could remember and beyond. Originally a Methodist camp meeting, it was still a dry town on a barrier island below Atlantic City. We all loved the place with its white sand beaches and crisp sea, and I only had to survive for fourteen days.

*If it were just two generations, Lord, I thought wistfully. Even though I'm not the best people person, I can do two generations. It's trying to balance three that gives me heartburn. Help!*

"Your mother and I loved the shore," my father said suddenly in my ear.

I jumped. The man persisted in sneaking up on me and dropping one of his "your mother and I" statements. He'd been doing it ever since Mom died fifteen months ago. Then his eyes would fill with tears, he'd look at me with a sad, hound dog expression and he'd sniff, the picture of pathetic.

When Mom had first died and he'd started this routine, my heart had broken for him every time. After all, I missed her dreadfully too. I'd start sniffing with him in sympathetic pain, sort of like I'd groaned with Patti when the girls were born. But his act had gotten old after several months, and my well of sympathy/empathy had long since run dry.

Dad looked out over the beach to the sea with his patented hound dog look. "We met here in Ocean City, you know." As if he hadn't told me a million times, about half of those times on the two-hour drive to the shore today. He turned his tear-filled eyes to me and sniffed.

I bit back a very uncharitable retort and asked as mildly as I could, "Do you have your beach tag, Dad?"

"Beach tag?" The tears disappeared, his shoulders straightened and a militant light gleamed where seconds ago the tears had glistened. "I don't believe in beach tags. The beaches should be free to all!"

"Unfortunately the town fathers don't agree. You have to pay your money and wear your tag."

"Your mother and I never wore tags." And with that definitive statement, he stalked down the stairs.

With a sigh I slid his beach tag - which actually came free with the rental -- into the little pocket on my swim trunks. If the poor kid unfortunate enough to be the tag checker happened by, I'd whip Dad's tag out and save us an embarrassing confrontation. After all, it was just some kid trying to earn college money, not an issue over which to take an unflinching stand for liberty.

"I've got my tag," announced my nineteen-year-old daughter Cass as she pinned it to her modest blue suit just above a bosom that threatened to overflow its moorings. Every time I looked at her in a swimsuit, my blood pressure went sky high. Not that she flaunted herself. She did not. She was very self-conscious, if the truth be told. I just remembered what it was like to be a boy her age, hormones raging, imagination firing on all pistons, and my parental imagination went berserk.

"But you're not allowed to lock your daughters away until they're fifty," Patti had told me when I first suggested the idea a few years ago. "I think it's against the law."

"Law, schmaw," I told her. "A father has certain duties and responsibilities."

"And I've got my tag," eighteen-year-old Zusi announced. Zusi was wearing a few scraps of material that she called a bathing suit, the designer

called a summer fantasy and I called an expensive rip-off. How could so little material cost so much money? Thankfully Zusi wasn't built like Cass.

"She's going to give me a heart attack, but at least it won't be over her figure," I told Patti when I first saw the suit.

"A lot you know," my wife answered unsympathetically. "Slim is in. Besides, her legs are incredible."

And I'd been so happy in denial.

Zusi's real name was Suzi, but when she was thirteen, she decided it was too common. "My name is now spelled z-u-s-i," she announced one evening at dinner.

"Zoo-see?" I said. "You think that's better than Suzi?"

"Oh, you still say it the same way," she said in casual disregard to all the rules of pronunciation. "It's just spelled different."

"That's crazy, Suzi," I said with my usual tact and understanding of the teenage feminine mind.

"But it's only crazy, dear." Patti patted my arm. "Save your spleen for something that actually matters."

So I saved my spleen, whatever that is, and tried with limited success to determine what those things were that actually mattered.

As I started down the stairs with my beach chair and Dad's beach tag, Zusi squealed, "Look, Cass! Boys!"

"Where?" Cass sounded contained, controlled as always, but I knew she was salivating almost as much as Zusi. They tore down the stairs and

across the dunes, then sauntered oh-so-casually toward a blanket and the three muscle-bound apes lying on it.

"Patti," I said, trying not to whimper.

"Two weeks." She patted my arm. "Only fourteen days, Hal. You can make it. *Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.*"

"I'm biblical," I said. "It is today's trouble I'm worrying about."

We located Dad near the water's edge and settled beside him. When I opened my chair, I put my back to the girls so I wouldn't have to watch the apes drool over them.

"Come on, Hal." Dad climbed to his feet. "Let's go into the water."

"But I just sat," I said. "I have a new book to read. Besides, it looks cold."

"It always looks cold," he answered, staring at me until I twitched.

I sighed, clambered to my feet and followed him to the water's edge. We began to wade in. It was cold.

"Your mother used to love the ocean." Dad gazed at the horizon, tears forming in his eyes. "We'd hold hands and walk in together. She'd always gasp when the first wave hit her tummy." He turned to me, as hound dog as they come. He sniffed.

I rolled my eyes, at least metaphorically. "Dad, I seem to remember Mom standing in the shallows while you raced past her, swatting her on the rump and yelling, "Chicken!" Then you'd head for the deep water where you'd

float and play until either you were a prune or the life guards whistled you in for going out too far, whichever came first."

Dad studied me with concern. "For a relatively young man, you have a very faulty memory. Watch for premature dementia."

I left him to become a teary-eyed prune all on his own.

"Daddy?"

I looked up from my book on full alert. It was the *daddy* that did it. Cass and Zusi stood there with the three apes drooling behind them.

"The guys are going to take us to the boardwalk tonight." Zusi was grinning from ear to ear.

"How nice." Patti smiled as if she actually meant it.

"The boardwalk on Saturday night?" I stared, aghast. "You want to fight the congestion, the crowds? I wouldn't go near the boardwalk on Saturday night."

Everyone was polite enough to refrain from reminding me that I hadn't been invited.

The phone rang at eleven, minutes after I had discovered several new gray hairs when I looked in the bathroom mirror. I don't think it was just my sun-reddened nose making those I already had more obvious. They were honest-to-goodness new ones brought on by the drooling apes.

I managed to beat Patti to the phone, thanks to the hip check I threw at her as I sped past. "What's wrong?" I yelled into the receiver.

"Dad!" Cass's voice was nearly drowned out by the noises around her. Superman wasn't the only one who missed the old-fashioned phone booths

where you could actually shut out the noise as well as change an outfit. "Can you come pick us up?"

"Where are you?" My heart thrummed as I waited for the answer. I just hoped I could find the deserted road where the apes had taken them and molested them. I hoped they weren't scarred for life. I hoped the police didn't badger them. I hoped I could be calm and supportive.

"At tenth and the boardwalk. We'll walk out to Wesley and wait on the steps of the Baptist church."

"Where are the apes - the guys?"

"They wanted to go to Somer's Point to go drinking. We didn't."

This time I was the one with tears in my eyes, tears of pride.

We all went back to the Baptist church for the service the next morning. As we walked up the front steps, Dad said, "Your mother and I used to come here all the time." Tears filled his eyes. He gave a lusty sigh, and his hound dog face brought a look of concern to the usher who handed us our bulletins.

We four took our seats while Dad fished in his pocket for his hankie. He blew his nose with panache and great volume, then took his seat where he slumped, woebegone. He didn't move the whole hour, not even when we stood to sing.

Patti patted me on the arm when the service ended. "Don't let him bother you." She smiled.

"Have I told you recently that I love you?" I asked as I thanked the Lord for one sane member of this family. And she was cute, too. Cuddly. And all mine.

"Warren Lipton!" a chirpy voice called. "That is you, isn't it, Warren?"

Dad shot out of his seat, his face alight with wonder. "Betty Ann Mercer!"

Dad and Betty Ann met in the aisle and embraced enthusiastically. Then he gave her a great noisy kiss on the lips. The hound dog and the sniffles were nowhere in evidence.

"Betty Ann and I used to date," Dad told us as he introduced his friend. "That was before she married old Whatshisname."

Betty Ann punched him playfully in the arm. "Tommy Williams, as if you didn't know."

"So where is old Tommy?" Dad asked, looking around.

Betty Ann suddenly looked teary-eyed. Dad nodded in understanding. "Alice too." He sniffled.

Then they looked at each other, and the electricity could have lit the boardwalk.

"It's not right," I told Patti as we walked down the church steps.

"He's still crying over Mom."

"It's wonderful," Patti said. "And it's about time. I hope he asks her out."

I was still reeling at the remark of my traitorous wife when the girls came tripping up.

"Guess what?" Zusi asked, her moussed hair standing up in little spikes.

"We met the neatest guys!" Cass's eyes shone as she tugged on her long braid. "They're coming to the beach this afternoon and bringing some friends!"

*Only thirteen days. Only thirteen more days.*

We all came back to town that evening, rosy and glowing from the sun. Dad was also glowing over his coming dinner date with Betty Ann.

"We're going to Mack and Manco Pizza for dinner," he said.

"I know you haven't dated for a long time, Dad," Patti said, "but isn't that a bit déclassé for a first date after all these years?"

"Memories," was all he said. It was the smile when he said it that worried me.

The girls glowed because the guys were meeting them for a walk "from one end of the boardwalk to the other".

"Aren't they the cutest?" gushed Zusi.

They hadn't spit into the sand or scratched impolitely during their visit with us that afternoon. Good signs, I guessed.

"And they don't drink," Cass said.

Wonderful lads, all.

As soon as we parked, the girls were off. "The guys will bring us home, Dad," Zusi called back over her shoulder. "Don't wait up."

Patti patted my arm. "*So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.*"

"Have you ever thought of getting another verse?" I asked. "Maybe *Trust in the Lord with all your heart* or something?"

There followed a long discussion with Dad about the use of the car. It had seemed such a good idea when we'd all driven down the shore in our van. Who could have imagined Dad would need wheels for a date?

"Do you have to drive her home?" I asked.

"Of course I have to drive her home. A gentleman always takes a lady home."

"That's sweet." Patti patted me again. I was beginning to feel like her pet dog.

"I meant, can't we all drive her home?"

"I do not want my children along when I say good night to Betty Ann. Whatever would she think of me? That I need chaperones?"

I didn't let myself touch that one. "But you're only taking her for pizza!"

They both stared at me like I lacked understanding, and truthfully I was beginning to wonder how I'd ever managed to marry Patti, let alone helped raise the girls, given my obvious level of interpersonal ineptitude.

"Okay," I grumped. "Meet us here at ten. You can take us home, then take Betty Ann home. Where's she staying?"

"At the Port O Call."

"But that's right on the boardwalk. You can walk her home!"

"See you at ten," he said as he walked toward the Port O Call to get Betty Ann.

I saw Patti's hand move and prepared for another patting session. Instead she rubbed soothing circles around my back.

"Come on," she said softly. "Let's go get a tub of Johnson's caramel popcorn. That'll cure what ails you."

I leaned over and kissed her temple. "I love you," I whispered.

"I know," she whispered back. "You love us all."

We were halfway through the big tub of popcorn when we walked past Mack and Manco's. I almost choked on a particularly tasty kernel when I looked in the window and saw Dad and Betty Ann sitting in a booth.

"They're sitting on the same side," I said as people parted around us like a river around a rock in its way. "Who sits on the same side?"

"We used to." Patti leaned close.

"Did we stare at each other like that?"

I could hear the laughter in her voice. "Probably."

Then she gulped just as I did when Dad leaned over and kissed Betty Ann. In Mack and Manco's. In a booth. In public. Then Betty Ann fed him a bite of pizza.

"I can't stand it," I muttered, walking on, oblivious to the swirling crowds.

"It's better than tears and sniffles," Patti said, taking my hand.

"I don't know. He scares me even more than the girls do."

We met Dad and Betty Ann at the car at ten. They came sauntering up holding hands and giggling. It's hard to hear your father giggle. They dropped us off and went back to where we had just come from.

"Let's read in bed," Patti suggested. "All that sun and sea air has made me tired."

"I'm not going to bed until everyone's home."

"You can still read in bed. Just don't go to sleep."

Foolishly I agreed. The phone by the bed woke me at 12:30 AM.

"The girls!" I grabbed the receiver. "What's wrong?"

"Hal." It was Dad, wide awake and brimming with energy. "I locked myself out of the van."

I blinked, trying to get my mind around this unexpected scenario.

"What?"

"I'm at Betty Ann's, and I locked myself out of the van."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Bring me another set of keys." Betty Ann laughed in the background.

"But you've got the car."

"So get a cab. I can't stay here all night. I can't even leave the car here all night. Think of the damage to Betty Ann's reputation. And her grandchildren are here. I know nothing wrong would happen and you know nothing wrong would happen, but what would they think if they found me here in the morning or if they saw my car here? Kids don't need any excuses these days. "

Tell me something I didn't know.

I climbed out of bed and lurched across the hall to the bathroom. When I emerged, I noticed the low murmur of voices from the big porch overlooking the beach. I grabbed a pair of shorts and went to investigate.

Cass, Zusi and five guys sat on the recliners and chairs, soda cans, chip bags, pizza box and my Johnson's popcorn tub, now empty, littering the floor.

"Hey, Dad." Cass smiled her sweet smile. "Hope we didn't wake you."

"Hey, Dad," Zusi said. "You remember the guys."

I nodded vaguely as they sketched little waves in my direction. "I've got to call a cab."

Cass followed me into the kitchen where I rummaged for a phone book. A tall, skinny guy with a formidable beak of a nose followed her in and came to rest very, very close to her. Very close.

"But he worries me," the guy said to Cass. "He's too sensitive to be Arminian in his theology. He'll spend his whole life in fear over losing his salvation."

"So you want him to be a Calvinist and spend his whole life worrying over those who aren't elect?"

"At least he'll know his own place in the scheme of things."

I stared at Cass and the young man. Arminian? Calvinist? "Who's too sensitive?"

"Pete," they answered together, pointing to the porch. "He's having trouble with predestination and election," Cass clarified.

Zusi walked in, trailing a refugee from the World Wrestling Entertainment. "I told him he doesn't have to decide right this very minute." She dimpled at the guy. "I mean, if great men of God like Calvin and Wesley didn't agree, what makes you think you'll come up with all the answers?"

Pete, I assumed, the sensitive one.

"Well," Pete said defensively, "I like order."

"Too bad," Zusi said. "No one else has reconciled 'Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated' with 'whosoever will may come'. I don't think you'll be the first."

Pete looked downcast until Zusi laid a hand on his arm and began patting, just like her mother. The boy brightened immediately.

"Just trust the Lord, Pete," she said. "He loves you whether you have all the answers or not."

I looked at my daughters, totally confounded. When had they begun discussing theology with their dates? How had I missed their maturing, their depth?

"Why are you calling a cab at this hour?" Cass asked as I thumbed through the yellow pages.

"Granddad has locked himself out of the van. I need to call a cab to take me and Mom's car keys to the Port O Call."

"Hey," Pete said. "I've got to leave. I have to be at work at 5:30 this morning. I need at least a couple of hour's sleep or I'll burn everyone's eggs and pancakes. I'll drive you in."

I smiled at Pete, sensitive man that he was, and didn't even mind when he asked Zusi if she'd be free tomorrow night.

That's how I came to be riding on a motor scooter that sounded like a giant mosquito, clinging to the waist of a Goliath with a sensitive spirit, waiting for someone to reach out with a humongous flyswatter and squish us.

When I finally climbed back in bed with the sleeping Patti, Dad safely rescued, I leaned over and kissed her sloppily on both eyes. I figured that if I had to be awake, so did she. Fair is fair, even if he was only her father-in-law.

"Interesting day," she muttered after she punched me in the gut and dried her eyes.

"Understatement." I slid down onto my pillow. "My whole perception of everyone but you has changed."

"Huh?" She blinked sleepily, trying to focus on what I was saying. Wonderful woman.

"The girls are arguing theology and Dad is dating." I shook my head. "Life just doesn't get any stranger."

"*Trust in the Lord with all your heart,*" Patti muttered.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Only twelve more days. How very sad."

Author's note:

While I didn't grow up in Ocean City, I am a New Jersey girl, raised in Audubon just across the Delaware River from Philadelphia. I did, however, spend many a summer "down the shore", first as a child at my grandparents' boarding house on Park Place, then as a college student waitressing for the summer at the now demolished Raleigh Hotel at Tenth and Wesley, cattycorner from the Baptist church.

In fact, I met my husband Chuck at the Baptist church when he came to a college activity while he was on vacation. A generation prior, my mother met my father in Ocean City when Dad played his trumpet in a band at a restaurant on the boardwalk. As she told the story, every night Dad would play a song just for her, looking soulfully at her the whole time. She fell hard and never recovered, thank goodness.

Such civilities as live music during dinner have disappeared in today's casual vacation setting, but so have the dresses and gloves, suits and ties everyone wore at the shore back then. I guess I prefer comfort to class. But the sand and sea and sun, God's contributions to the shore, haven't changed. It's almost like He says, "Everybody, come on down!"