

LOVE
by
Sandra de Helen

I'll never leave you, he said. Well, he didn't say it, but he meant it. Didn't he? When he held my head against his chest, when he sang me to sleep, when he held my hand in the woods -- didn't he imply he would be there forever?

Or was I naive, a fool's fool, a simple country girl, sweet but unsophisticated, unwise to the ways of the world?

Seven years was just a beginning, a minute, a flash of lightning in the storm of life. To me. But for him it was enough, an ending, time to go. He left.

At first I didn't, couldn't, believe it. It had to be a trick, some cruel joke designed to test me somehow. People didn't leave other people like that, without warning, without saying good-bye, without a note.

I looked for him everywhere. I prayed for someone to show him to me, to tell me where he was hiding so I could go there myself.

My life seemed to slide just out of my reach, always before or behind me. I could think of nothing but him. I longed for him, cried for him, buried my face in the tobacco smell of his jacket, the sweat band of his hat.

I cut my hair. I changed my appearance. I learned to play the piano.

After several years, I fell in love with another man. And another. And another. At mid-life I changed my preference and fell in love with a woman. And another. And another.

But my heart was too crowded, too empty of him. My soul was gray with fear. If I dared love, really love, they would leave me. I knew it. I was no longer that simple uneducated child. I'd learned my lesson.

I'll always leave you, I said. Well, I didn't say it, but I meant it. Didn't I? You bet I did. Leave them before they leave you. That was my motto. But I was never so cruel as he had been. I left a note. Usually. Unless I forgot, but a person couldn't help it if she forgot, could she? There are so many things to remember when you're preparing to leave.

Remember all the hurts, the slights, the innuendoes. Remember to interpret every remark as a prelude to good-bye. Remember to protect yourself with a thick wall of righteousness so it won't hurt as you pack your bags and leave the arms that once held you, protected and secure, loving

and warm, safe from abandonment.

And forget about her pain. It's nothing compared to the pain I suffered when HE left. After all, she's a grown woman, I was only seven years old when my father died.

And then something happens. A change. A shift in the wind. Maybe he appears in a dream. I don't know. I don't remember the exact moment of realization.

But somehow, something opened a tiny door to the possibility of love. Real love. You came into my life, and I went openly into yours.

And now it's been seven years. The gray of fear paints more hours of my days than I care to say. My old habits pound at the doors and windows of my mind, shouting at me to protect myself, to gather ammunition, to pack my bags. And you, you whom I love, distance yourself, wander around, look like you're heading for the door yourself sometimes. My feet itch. My heart suffers small rips and tears as the winds of change violently blow.

But I'm sophisticated now. Wise to the ways of the world. I know that love means trust. Faith in the face of change. Baring my soul and bearing my fear. I'll never leave you, I say. And what I mean is, I'll always be here.
