

. . . In dedication to my love, Carrie Mull . . .

Though the alarm was set for seven, the old man woke just after five and decided to make the morning coffee. Slipping the covers back, he moved his legs over the side of the bed and winced as his arthritic knees ground under the strain of supporting his body. Casting a glance at the old woman still asleep in the bed, he began to creep forward onto the crotchety old floorboard. True to form after years of use, the floor groaned softly.

"Oh cut that out," whispered the old man, "do you want to wake her up?"

He opened the door to the hall and softly trod down the hallway, passing before the pictures lining each wall. One faded photograph showed the couple playing ball with friends at a park while they were in college, and another showed them exchanging a parting kiss among a crowd of sad-faced couples just before the young man boarded the ship that carried him to war in Europe. Distant ancestors peered from cracked and fuzzy daguerreotypes in antique wooden frames, and, further down the hall, their wedding picture and photographs of young children surrounded the family portrait. The last pictures, the most recent additions to the hallway, showed the same couple, now with more gray in their hair, holding their toddler grandchildren as they vainly tried to squirm away. But this morning, the same as most others, the old man slowly shuffled past the pictures without any notice.

After descending the stairs, the old man carefully made his way through the quiet living room toward the kitchen--dark except for the orange glow of the plastic light-up Halloween decoration facing the lonely street from the far window. The battered and worn jack-o-lantern had been bought for his youngest son when he was five-years-old. He enjoyed the fact that it gave his children and grandchildren as much happiness as it gave him, and, even after his children left home to raise families of their own, he continued to put it in that window.

After stopping in the middle of the floor to pick up a small toy left overnight by his grandson, he

ambled over to the coffee machine and plugged it in before he filled it with a paper filter, the last of the ground coffee he brought home every Monday from the corner market, and a pitcher of water. With a flip of a switch, a little red light signaled the start of its routine of gurgling and slurping.

As the coffee brewed, the old man plodded across the kitchen, through the living room, to the foyer. He opened the front door and stepped outside to the morning newspaper which lay five feet down the walk.

"That kid's aim gets worse by the week," he muttered as a swift autumn breeze cut through his light cotton pajamas. He quickly scooped up the newspaper and hurried back into the warm comfort of his house, being careful not to slam the door too hard for fear of waking his wife. Leaning against the door, he wondered how often he had told his children not to slam the door, and remembered the afternoon he came home from work and found the screen-door off its hinges. Their mother, unable to get any of the children to say who was responsible, had sent them to their rooms to wait for him to get home. After setting them all down on the couch, he tried for fifteen minutes to get them to tell...but they wouldn't. He sent all three of them to bed without dinner. They never said a word except to quietly mumble "good-night" on their way up the stairs. They were covering up, he knew; but it was quite a sight to see them stick up for each other. It made him proud to see them bonding together and took the edge from his anger.

After some time he shook his head and glanced at the newspaper. He smiled at the date printed at the top of the page: October 12.

"Fifty years today," he remarked with a crooked smile--the trademark of his younger days, "I just can't believe it."

Switching on the lamp, he settled down on the living room couch with the newspaper. He enjoyed the warmth of the cushion, heated by the small floor vent just underneath. He tried to interest himself in the headlines of the day, but somehow the President's trip to Martha's Vineyard and the latest squabbling between Rwanda and Nigeria held no fascination for him. Instead his mind drifted to the old woman lying asleep upstairs.

He remembered the sweet sound of her voice as she sang at their high school's talent show so many decades ago, and recalled that, as she sang, the audience around him faded into a gray background as though in a dream so that only he and she seemed real. He remembered the smell of the crisp autumn afternoon when, as they sat in a park, he first realized how much he loved her; and he remembered how, over an overdone turkey dinner at his apartment, she had accepted his proposal to marry--showering him with happiness and untying his stomach, knotted with anticipation.

The aroma of fresh coffee brought him out of his daydream, and he slowly shuffled into the kitchen, filled an old chipped mug with coffee, and sat down at the table. He sat absentmindedly blowing on his coffee and remembering the first time he asked his wife out on a date and how the two of them acted as though they weren't particularly interested in each other, merely going through the motions because they had no one else. He thought about how that changed as they spent more time together. He thought of her sweet face, her pretty eyes hidden behind thick glasses, and the delicate curve of her little pug nose.

He tried to imagine what his life would have been like without her, but couldn't. No matter where he had been, she was there, a part of him that could not be lost. She had been with him in Europe when he was sent to fight the Nazis; and it was the thought of her, a constant in those uncertain times, that brought sanity to that insane war. When he slept, she was there; and when he spent six months in a hospital recovering from a German artillery shell, the thought of her love saved him. At that darkest time, he lived for her.

He gently touched his left shoulder and probed the old scars. She seemed to love him even more when he returned late that summer of 1944, and she gently soothed the painful memories that followed him home. With time, his recollection of the war grew dim, but his love for her never did.

Just back from the war, he had little to offer except himself. She accepted his offer and they married, a four-year interruption had put off the event. He had refused to let her marry a man who might not come home--but now the time had come. Feeling more alive than at any other time in his life, he slipped

the plain golden ring on her delicate finger and sealed together their lives.

Glancing thoughtfully around the kitchen, the old man chuckled at the memory of their first home, a cramped, two-bedroom apartment on the wrong side of the tracks. But those were the days of their youth, now they live in a fine home with a green yard, periodically overrun by neighborhood children, and the mementoes of five decades. He glanced at the vacuum cleaner standing in the corner beside the microwave oven and remembered how he and his son would rise early on Saturday mornings to surprise his wife by cleaning the house before she woke. And, with the same clarity of that memory, he remembered the last time he saw his son--when he boarded the plane that carried him to Vietnam.

After some time, he looked at the clock on the wall; it read twenty minutes of seven.

"She'll be up soon," he realized and started for the back door. Unlatching it, he stepped out into the dark dawn toward the greenhouse he kept near the back stoop. He entered and collected a handful of the remaining geraniums before going back inside the kitchen where he put them in a vase along with a cup of coffee on a small tray.

He ascended the stairs cautiously, not wanting to ruin the surprise by waking her too early, and made his way down the hall toward the bedroom. But this time the old man did notice the pictures on the wall and smiled. No one picture drew his attention, but, rather, all of them together represented all he ever really wanted out of life. It almost amused him to think about how those pictures, snapshots of his life, had melted away into the very routine of his existence.

He entered the bedroom and set the tray on the table by the bed so he could turn off that infernally loud alarm. Then he gazed fondly down on the face he loved more than any other as it slowly stirred.

Upon waking the old woman sniffed at the strong presence of the coffee on the table beside her. Her eyes opened softly and stared at the wrinkled countenance of her husband standing above, while a smile crept across her lips.

"Good morning, Sweetie," he softly whispered, "and happy anniversary."