

REMEMBER

By Blanca Estrela

I remember him in the quiet moments.

I remember him when I'm sitting in his favourite chair, looking out the front window like he used to. I remember him when my hand brushes against the throw that I knit for him all those years ago. I remember him when Tina makes a cup of tea, and the smell of peppermint fills the house.

Here comes Tina now, holding the same mug he always used. "Can I get you anything, mom?" Tina asks. She is such a kind, helpful girl – she gets that from her father. She was his little girl, even after she had a child of her own, and Henry would do anything to make her happy.

"No thank you, sweetheart," I answer.

She places her hand on my knee. It shocks me to see the wrinkles on her hands. She was our little girl not too long ago, and now she is a grown woman.

"Is everything okay?" she asks. Why do young people always assume that there's something wrong with the elderly?

"Just thinking, darling," I answer. I see the sadness in her smile; as though she knows the pain of having the person you spent sixty years of your life with ripped away from you. Then again, she did lose a father.

"Kelsey is graduating tomorrow, do you remember?" Tina says. She asks me that question often, reminding me. It's as though she believes these lapses in memory are my own doing. But yes, I do remember Kelsey's graduation. My granddaughter, the first in our family to graduate from university. Henry would have been so proud.

"Yes dear, I do. Are we having supper after?" This part I can't remember, although I assume she would have told me already. The look on her face proves me right.

"Yes mom, we're going to that Japanese restaurant Kelsey really likes. Remember you came with us last time, and you really liked those shrimp?" I don't remember, but I don't want to disappoint her again, so I smile and nod.

We sit in silence for a few minutes. This is one of the things I miss most about Henry. We would come into this room with the big bay window together, he would read his paper, I would knit, sometimes we would play the radio, but mostly we would just sit in silence, at peace in each other's company.

It was during one of these times that it happened. We were each immersed in our own tasks, and then I heard his sharp intake of breath. I looked up and could see that his face had gone as white as paper and he was clutching his left side. I knew in that moment.

I held his hand the whole time and whispered how much I loved him over and over; how I didn't know how to be without him; how the past sixty years had been a blessing. He couldn't speak, but stared into my eyes, and I understood that he was repeating all that I said back to me. I remember how he tried to move his lips and I heard, ever so quietly, "Goodbye, my sweetheart."

By the time the ambulance came, he had left us. I held him as he took his last breath, and I felt a part of my soul detach to fly away with his.

Four months later, and I still feel that gap in my soul, aching for him to come back.

"Mom?" Tina says, waking me from my reverie. I'm not sure how long I sat there thinking, remembering.

Through the window, I see a child ride by on a bicycle and think about the time that Henry and I rode bicycles together in Versailles.

"Tina," I call out.

My daughter comes rushing back. "What is it mom, are you okay?" The worry is evident in her voice. I've told her for some time now to calm down, that the worry will only kill her faster.

"Have I ever told you about that time your father and I rode bicycles in France?"

She smiles and sits back down beside me. "I don't think so mom, what happened?"

"This was in oh... let's say 1975. So ten years or so ago," I pause. "What year are we in now?"

"2017 mom," she answers.

"Are we really? Oh well there you go. It was our third time in France, it's my favourite place to visit, you know?"

She nods and I continue, "We visited Versailles with one of those tour groups. We had the whole day there. It was such a beautiful sunny spring day. We decided to rent bicycles and ride around the grounds. It was lovely." I remember the flowers in the gardens and how Henry took one and put it in my hair.

"That sounds beautiful," Tina says to me. She has that look in her eyes that tells me she has heard this story before but I'm thankful that she doesn't say anything and allows me to relive it again.

Henry and I would talk about that vacation often. I now know that I will never see France again but I hope these memories will hold on a little bit longer so that I can remember them in the harder days.

I decide that I want to tell Kelsey this story and assure her that she should find a man who will bring her to France. "Tina, when will I be seeing Kelsey next? I would like to tell her about the trip to Versailles."

"Tomorrow mom, remember? It's her graduation and we're going out to dinner," Tina says.

Kelsey graduating? That doesn't seem right. I remember Kelsey as a young child, running around the house, begging Henry to chase her, and asking me for ice cream. We always kept a tub of butterscotch ice cream in the freezer for her because we knew that it was her favourite.

"Are you sure you're okay? I can stay longer if you need me to," Tina says, always the worrier.

"No, I'm fine," I say, wondering where I left my knitting supplies.

"Maria will be here soon to make you dinner," Tina says. I wonder briefly who Maria is, but I don't want to worry her any further so I smile.

"Mom, when would you like the company to come clean up dad's things?" Tina asks.

Never, I think. Tina has asked me this question often, as though Henry's belongings are an annoyance to me. When I was a child and a family member died, no one ever thought to toss their belongings aside like they meant nothing. "It's too soon for that, Tina. Let me hold on for just a little longer."

"Too soon? Mom it's been three years, you have to move on eventually."

Three years? I search Tina's face to see if she's teasing me. A few months maybe, but years? Tina is looking at me, concerned.

"What day is it, mom?" she suddenly asks.

I have no answer. From the weather outside, I can see it's spring sometime. But I can't remember the year or day.

I laugh, ignoring her question and trying to ease the situation. "Why don't you call the company in tomorrow?"

Her face hardens. "We're busy tomorrow, mom. It's Kelsey's graduation." Oh right, now I remember. I think we're going to supper after, too.

Tina sits down beside me again. She has one of those mobile phones that I always see Kelsey with in her hands. Why is this generation so obsessed with these pieces of plastic? I feel sorry that they will never know the joys of handwritten notes.

Henry always wrote me the sweetest notes. He was a talented poet and wrote me love poems and letters. I remember how he hid the notes around the house so that I would find and read them while he was work. I hope that I still have the notes somewhere.

Tina is speaking into the phone and I hear her ask if Maria can come earlier. She says, "It's really bad today, she's getting worse" and I wonder what's wrong with Maria. She smiles at me when she notices I'm watching her. She looks so much like her father, the sharp jawline, long nose, and dark eyes.

She hangs up and says, "Maria will be here a bit earlier today. I wish I could stay, but I need to go pick up Kelsey's dress for tomorrow, since the store is closing in twenty minutes." I want to ask her what the dress is for but before I get a chance, she is back up again. Tina is always moving around and working. I tell her that she needs to go on a vacation and enjoy life more while she still can.

"Tina, you should really go to France. You can visit Versailles while you're there and ride bicycles on the grounds. We did it a few years ago and it was lovely," I say. Some of my happiest memories are in France.

Tina suddenly has tears in her eyes. "What's wrong sweetheart?" I ask, hoping everything is okay with my granddaughter.

"Nothing mom. Maria is on her way, she'll be here in ten minutes. Just stay put here until she comes, okay? I'll call you tonight and go over the plans for tomorrow," she says. I want to ask her what's happening tomorrow but don't want to upset her anymore, so I smile and nod.

"Is there anything I can get you to eat or drink before I leave?" she asks.

I try to remember the last time I've had a meal or drink, but find that I have no desire to do either anyway so I just say, "No, I'm just going to sit here a bit longer and maybe knit a bit tonight."

She leaves the room and comes back holding my knitting bag. "Here you go. Call me if you need anything at all. The phone is to your left, right there," she says.

Tina comes up to me and kisses me on my cheeks. "Bye mom, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodbye, my sweetheart," I say, remembering the words Henry spoke to me.

I watch her as she opens the front door and closes it behind her. I watch from the window as she gets into her car and backs out of the driveway. I watch her drive down the street, passing the children on bicycles, and out of my eyesight.

The house is quiet and I try to remember the song Henry and I danced to, that night we were in Paris. We had gone out to dinner and Henry insisted we dance after our meal. In this moment, I think that there is nothing I would like more than to have one more dance with him. Hear his laugh one more time. Tell him I love him once more.

I remember him in the quiet moments.

Bianca Estrela is just beginning to develop her love of writing and has no previous publications. She lives in Toronto and is currently enrolled in a Creative Writing program where she hopes to build the skills to write a novel. This story is based on her loving, amazing and inspiring grandmother.