

Love Story

By Michael Groetsch

The elderly couple entered the restaurant almost inconspicuously. Had it not been for the sweetness of their conversation and demeanor, I would not have noticed them. She sat in a wheelchair dressed in a dark black blouse, skirt, and patent leather shoes that rose to the ankles. The overhead lights gave her snow-white hair a bluish tint. Walking with the aid of an oak-colored cane, a frail man with thick glasses proudly pushed her through the cafeteria line as if she were his new bride.

“Honey,” she asked affectionately, “would you please order me the baked chicken and a glass of water?”

“Yes, dear,” he responded. “Is there anything else that I can get for you?”

“A salad would also be nice. The doctor suggested that I eat more meat and vegetables.”

As they stood in line and gathered their food selections, he touched her right shoulder with hands that appeared to be the work of Van Gogh. Dark colored veins with light blue highlights protruded and radiated erratically around his fingers and wrists. Although his hands were discolored and distorted by years of aging, he used them to convey his most intimate and caring thoughts. As he rubbed his wrinkled fingers through her thinning hair, she smiled and whispered, “I love you.”

A young man wearing a green shirt with *Piccadilly Cafeteria* embroidered beneath his left shoulder, welcomed and ushered the couple to their table. “It’s always a pleasure to see you, Mr. and Mrs. Hymel. If there is anything else that you may need, please feel free to ask.” As the valet removed the food from the tray and arranged it in

front of them, the elderly man placed a napkin on his wife's lap and gently kissed her forehead.

Sitting in an empty dinner booth next to theirs, I found myself drawn to the couple's presence. I felt a sense of envy in witnessing such intimacy. I wanted to hear more of their story. How long have they been married, I wondered? Did they have children? Grandchildren?

As I sat and discreetly listened to their conversation, it became apparent that their life together would soon come to an end. She had been diagnosed with cancer and her doctor had made her aware that she probably would not see another Christmas.

While eating dinner, she began to express herself with the elegance of a polished gem, in an obvious attempt to experience closure with the man whom she had shared her life.

"Honey, I will miss you so very much. We have had 62 wonderful years together. You have always been my best friend. Although I will soon be physically absent from your life, the essence of who I am will be forever echoed through our children and their children's children. When they cry, they will be shedding my tears. When they speak, they will be uttering my words. When they touch you, you will feel my presence. When they embrace you, you will feel my warmth. When you look into their eyes, you will see my reflection. While death may separate our bodies, it will never separate our souls."

Tears began to well in the old man's eyes. Each time that his wife took a bite of her food, he gently wiped her lips with a soft napkin. He touched her cheek with his left hand. His eyes met hers as their souls reaffirmed a sense of oneness.

As I witnessed such uninhibited intimacy between the aging couple, images of my wife, Barbara, and my children began to race through my mind like a family video. I became anxious to see them at the end of the workday. I had forgotten to kiss Barbara when I left home this morning. I suddenly felt a need to embrace my wife and kids. The open display of love that the couple had expressed in my presence made me painfully aware of how much we take life for granted. So often, we ignore those things most important to us.

Finishing their meal, the old man and his wife departed the restaurant in the same manner that they entered, with affectionate conversation. He took the napkin from her lap, wiped her brow, and softly touched her hair. Pulling the wheelchair from the table's edge, with cane in hand, he began to push his wife to the exit.

Wanting to hear more of their story, I quietly followed until they reached their silver gray Buick with a handicapped license plate. As he carefully lifted her from the wheelchair and placed her on the front seat like an injured sparrow, she softly said, "I never wanted to be a burden to you."

"You have never been a burden, sweetheart. You are my strength. You are my princess. You are my soul. I love you, Mary."

"I love you too, Henry. I love you, too."

"It's better to have loved and lost, than never have loved at all.." - Lord Tennyson Alfred