

BEST STORY AWARD

Of Dandelions, Tears, and Memories

On a Thursday in late April, a day when the sun lent a preview of summer's warmth and the air was scented with the freshness of spring, when the fragrance of blooming lilacs was carried on a mild, southerly breeze, my grandfather slipped away quietly into death, losing what had been a two-month battle with illness and age. It was a battle in which he had engaged before, and which he had won, but now a battle which he fought for the last time.

The weekend following would provide a series of reunions, updates, and memories, as relatives and friends, who ordinarily gathered on rare occasions, bade their final farewells. Much of our time was spent milling about, creating idle chatter, comforting, and hearing "How much you've changed" and "You haven't changed a bit," time and again. Bouquets, vestments given in memoria, and brief notes of solace rested mutely near the brass-plated casket, where lay my grandfather, clad in a blue tweed suit, his rosary clutched in his hands. Copious tears were shed for him, yet they seemed merely tears of propriety, tears which one is obligated to weep at wakes and funerals. But I had been with him during his waning weeks, and seen him defeated, broken, suffering emotionally as well as physically. It seemed that then, not now, was the time to shed tears.

During those last weeks of his life, I had watched a man lose virtually all that kept him alive and come to depend almost totally on others, others who before had depended on him for so many years. Like the lives of most people, his had possessed its share of hardships and pain, yet he always managed to see through the darkness and strive for the light toward the end. The stroke that he had suffered seven years earlier would not hamper the life style to which he had been accustomed and which he had enjoyed. Granted, it would alter his pattern of living somewhat and he would have to adjust. His speech had become impaired; he was forced to develop a certain level of patience with himself when he was not able to communicate with others. No longer would he be able to drive to the nearby shopping center or to Warren Tavern or to daily Mass, or to visit with friends for hours on end. Now he would be compelled to walk — shuffle, really — to his various destinations, now closer to home, but he would manage to adapt. Also, out of need for activity, he took a renewed interest in his yard and garden. Now he spent many of the warm, summer afternoons kneeling over the backyard flower bed replanting or weeding, or just raking the lawn. Though he was aged and his life had taken a less desirable course, he managed to remain content.

The biting chill of winter arrived, always too soon, bringing a frost to his garden and treacherous ice to the sidewalks, to cast a shadow over him, a shadow that would not relinquish until the warming days of spring. Through the post-holiday months he would often stand at the dining room window, staring out into the gray and cold, awaiting the arrival of the spring thaw. With each succeeding winter a part of his spirit died. With each spring his spirit was renewed, each time, however, just a little bit less.

This spring, though, was not to resurrect him. He entered the hospital in February. He would not see the snows melt, nor would he see his flowers blossom again. I often watched him become irritable with frustration, calm himself, then stare blankly out the window. I saw him cringe when a pain-killing shot was administered, and I watched the tears swell in his eyes as he shook his head in disbelief when he was told that he would never be able to return home again. Then was the time to cry.

Now as I gazed down upon him resting in the coffin, I felt happy for him and inwardly I smiled, knowing his suffering was finished.

The following summer months found our entire family busily cleaning and clearing out my grandfather's house, preparing for its sale in August. The furniture still occupied the space it always had, except for the few choice articles that family members had claimed. The refrigerator and cupboards, always overflowing, were empty now. In corners of different rooms, boxes were stacked, waiting to be filled, while the living room furnishings remained covered with dust. The curtains were drawn, and the brighter the sun became, darker became the house inside. Throughout the house the silence was deafening as long forgotten memories lingered about.

Going to the house on Saturday morning, staying until late afternoon, and returning home with bundles and boxes became our regular weekend schedule. We spent those Saturdays rummaging through chests in the attic and crates in the basement, packing dishes and tools, or dusting and cleaning new-found family treasures, which required more space than any of us had room for, and which we would be forced to sell. It was a melancholy journey for us all, my mother especially, but we all busied ourselves and held up fairly well. Still, once in a while a drawer would be opened and the tears would begin to flow again.

It was a family obligation and each of us had a certain role to play in it, a task that each had to fulfill, mine being the care of the lawn. A mundane chore: fill the mower with gas, run it across the lawn, dump the clippings atop the compost. The object was to be done with all possible dispatch and out of there.

One weekday in July, however, I decided to ride over to the house and finish my task earlier so as to have my Saturday entirely free. I went through the usual motions of finding the gas can and filling the tank, but I soon found that the engine had flooded and would have to rest awhile before I could start it. With the house locked up and nowhere to go, I was forced to sit in the driveway and wait. But the mid-afternoon sun had been blazing down upon the asphalt, making it almost unbearable to sit on, so I had ambled over to inspect the garden. The roses and geraniums had blossomed beautifully and, further down, the raspberry bushes were beginning to bear fruit. Gazing down amid the fallen leaves and grass clippings, I could see how dry the soil had become. Connecting the hose to the spigot, I aimed the sprinkler towards the flowers and turned it on.

As I stood watching the droplets of water fall on the petals of the geraniums and splash to the grass, I became aware of hoards of dandelions that had blossomed over the weeks. Sighing, I stood and glared with disgust at the weeds. Scores and scores of yellow weeds had invaded the lawn everywhere. I glanced at the sprinkler and allowed myself to become entranced by the beads of water falling upon the yellow flowers of the dandelions. Then, as I looked through the spray of water and iridescent rainbow images that it made, I saw the door of the back porch open. There stood my grandfather in his dungarees and windbreaker, wearing work gloves, and holding two picks in his hands. Shuffling toward me, he reached out to hand me one.

"Not again, Grandpa. We just did it last week, and they'll only grow back again next week," I pleaded. "Let me just cut them down with the mower."

He shook his head and asserted, "Have to get 'em by the roots." We argued for a while, but, as always, he prevailed. The two of us spent nearly the entire afternoon yanking dandelions until every single one was pulled, all the while both of us cursing the dandelions and I cursing him.

A trickle of water eddied its way past my foot. I turned and noticed that a puddle had formed in the flower bed and was overflowing onto the lawn. After shutting off the sprinkler, I tried starting the lawn mower. It kicked over with ease, yet something bothered me. I looked back at the legions of dandelions. Angered at them, and even more at my own apathetic attitude, I turned off the mower, walked into the garage to search for a weed digger, and finally found one. Dropping to my knees, I began to dig at a dandelion. As I dug into it feverishly, the point of the digger severed the dandelion at the stem. Undaunted, I dug into the ground deeper and deeper. As I continued digging, I soon came to realize that I was trying to salvage a part of me that was now gone forever. Buried with my grandfather were the bitter-sweet days that we had shared, and no matter how much I pretended or wished or prayed, I knew that they could never return.

With tears welling up in my eyes and anger in my spirit, I dug deeper into the soil, pushing farther and farther down. A dog barking distantly in the neighborhood failed to distract me as I turned all my energy toward the dandelion, pushing deeper and deeper, until at last I lifted it out of the ground to see that I had gotten it by the root.

I sat back and caught my breath. Wiping a tear from my cheek, I scanned the dandelions around me. Again my tears, energy, and anger arose from within me, and I directed them at another dandelion, and then another, and another. □

Matthew Weiland '83

### *The Lonely Seat*

*Old man  
finds a seat  
surrounded by  
shapes*

*He sighs*

*Clouds form in his  
empty world*

*His stop is next.*

Eric Sosinski '83



