Together Forever

By Roy Roudine

The old man woke before 6:00 a.m., after a restless night, tossing and turning. He used to sleep well, peacefully, but not so much during these last 6 months. Not since his wife died, after a somber week in the hospital. He got up, unsteady on his feet, still healing from hip surgery, shuffling to the sink. He quickly washed his hands, splashed water on his face, and brushed back his thinning hair. Slipping on a robe and slippers he steadied himself with a cane, went down the hallway. Passing all the family photos hanging on the wall, he saw a picture of a bride and groom smiling at him. *Lord, were we ever that young?* he thought. Then, into the kitchen, snapping on the coffee pot he had set up the night before, he hobbled to the front door. Stepping outside and down the driveway he painfully, slowly stooped to pick up the two morning newspapers he enjoyed reading every morning. Standing at the end of the driveway, cradling the papers, he glanced next door, and down Shakespeare Drive, the street he and his wife and two daughters lived on for a long time. The girls, grown and on their own, his wife no longer with them, he recalled all the first neighbors, also moved on, and now, so many have passed away. He glanced across the street, at other homes, all with young families who grew up there, once upon a time, now gone. How long has it been? He wondered, let's see … 58 years since we moved on to Shakespeare Drive, well, that's something. *Where did all that time go?* he thought. Struggling a bit, the old man managed to get back inside his home and poured his first mug of coffee for the morning. He sat, cradling the newspapers in his lap, and was deep in thought. He stared out the large glass patio doors, at the birds, the flowering shrubs, and ignored reading for now. He sipped from the mug and thought about the day's chores and errands. Today is Friday, the day he regularly took flowers to his wife, in the cemetery. It was a dual grave, with both their names of the marker. Only his date was yet to come. He often wept as he placed the flowers and said a little prayer, always noting the inscription below their names, "Together Forever."

He decided to forgot the morning reading and any more coffee, suddenly feeling an urgency to get to his wife's cemetery promptly. He needed to shower, dress, clip some garden flowers, and get into the morning traffic. He shuffled up the hallway, into his bedroom. Before he showered, though, the sharp chest pain he often ignored, returned. He heard his cane clatter against the small bed stand, as he dropped it, and pitched forward face down on the mattress. He was conscious, but everything was black. Then he heard voices, strangely sounding like an echo-chamber. They were his daughters' voices. *How, when, did they get here*? he wondered. He tried to speak but couldn't. Things were strange. He couldn't move or see and wondered if he had a stroke. More voices, *paramedics*, he thought. Then a strange silence, a pleasant sensation of moving, then a bright but distant light. *Just what's all this about*, the old man thought. Suddenly, he was standing in a beautiful, but unfamiliar, garden and the light was brighter. He saw his wife, smiling, standing right in front of him. Stunned, he couldn't believe his eyes.

Then he heard her angelic voice: "Sweetheart, at last. Together Forever!"