

REMEMBRANCE

The old man sat comfortably in his favorite chair, staring at the red, blue, yellow of the flames flickering in the window of the pot-bellied stove across the small room. "It's been a good life," he murmured to himself.

His thoughts wandered back to when he was young. Though the snowdrifts outside were high, he no longer had to wade through them to school. But then, neither did he have the pleasure of sledding down the hill behind the barn with the neighbor kids.

"How lucky I was that my folks helped me get to high school," he thought thankfully. Not all the kids went because it wasn't required those days. "I liked school, I liked learning because it was a part of something bigger, a future to look forward to."

Though I was quite shy, I made new friends among my classmates. Even though I could not participate much in the after-school activities because I helped at home on the farm, I tasted some of the so-called social life of school--the games, a club, the dances. I was tall and very thin and felt awkward, but I guess we all have such phases to go through.

By my junior year, I became more aware that there are 'the boys' and then there are 'girls'! Some were 'Go, team.' tomboys, some, the bookworms, you could always count on to know the answer you needed, some 'girl next door' types you could dun for sympathy when you did poorly on a quiz--and then, there were those popular vivacious girls!

Emilia was one of those. I had especially watched and admired her that year. By my senior year, I was 'in love'--and what a wonderful and sometimes woeful feeling it was. Just to meet her in the hall, going by, was a rush, and if she said "Hi." I was on cloud nine for hours.

As the spring dance neared, I was determined to conquer my fears and ask Emilia to go to it with me. The days rushed by, though, and it never seemed to be the 'right' time. Then, one day, there she was, alone by her locker. I could wait no more. All the right words to say had been rehearsed and rerehearsed many times--"Emilia, would you like to attend the spring dance, etc....." Quickly joining her, I blurted out, "Emilia, would you go to the spring dance with me?" She turned to me and, with a nice smile, responded, "I was hoping you would ask me. You always have such a nice grin and cheerful "Hi." when we meet between classes. I'd love to go with you." I was so flustered I didn't know what to say. "I'll call you," I said and floated away to my next class!

The next two weeks just flew by. I called her house and talked briefly with her mother and then with Emilia. We had some

similar interests and found a lot to talk about. On the phone, I lost my shyness and it was just like we had been friends for years.

A few days before the dance, I got my hair cut in the then popular style and ordered a corsage for Emilia--orchids because she was so special. My mom checked my sportcoat to make sure it was clean and pressed and I even cleaned the car inside and out. Then, the big day, I shaved the few hairs I called a beard and used the after shave I had bought just for the occasion. With one eye on the clock, I tied and retied my tie, but it was still too early.

I had told Emilia, "I'll pick you up at seven." Promptly at seven, I walked up to her door. It was a beautiful evening with a pale moon hovering in the sky, but I was only aware of my rapidly beating heart. Emilia's father invited me in and we exchanged pleasantries until she came into the living room. "Wow!" She was a vision in a pale orchid full-skirted gown. I could hardly keep my hands from shaking as I handed her the corsage. "I hope you like it." I said as I watched her pin it on to her shoulder. "Oh, yes," she smiled, "it's perfect with my dress. Thank you so much."

The old man could remember every detail of the dance. We shared dances with a few other couples, but whenever we danced together, I found it hard to believe what had happened--that she was 'my girl' for the evening.

The man's reminiscing continued. Summer on the farm had been a busy one, as usual, leaving little time for social life, but there were a couple dances, a boisterous hayride with Emilia and other friends and a romantic moonlit walk along the beach one evening in July. The memories brought back the warm glow of those happy days.

All too soon it was August. I had planned to attend a college in the big city, Chicago, while Emilia had taken a job as a receptionist for a local dentist. Between my preparations and her job, our hours together were too infrequent and short, but we pledged to write often. I knew, too, I would spend the holidays back home with her. Many an evening in the dorm was spent looking forward to that pleasure.

So the years passed with sad goodbyes and joyful greetings and hugs whenever I came home. In her letters, Emilia kept me posted re all the big events that occurred in Two Rivers. I was happy that she was enjoying herself at ice skating and the dances, but I couldn't help wishing I could be there beside her.

Many hours were spent at classes and in the library. Good grades were important for my future--our future--and my pen lay idle sometimes while I daydreamed about that. "When I get my degree, I'll ask her and hope she'll say yes. And we'll build a

house in the country, and maybe later, we'll have a couple of kids....."

.....The old man felt a chill and roused himself from his reverie. The fire had died down to embers, so he got stiffly up and added a few more logs, welcoming the warmth from the open stove door.

Suddenly he felt sad and lonely. His dreams had been just that--dreams, and they never came true. Over the years of separation, Emilia had grown away from him. He had thought he had to have his degree and a good job before he could declare his love and ask her to marry him--and then it was too late. At Christmas break, his senior year, she tried to return the friendship ring he had given her. "I've gotten engaged to Bill," she whispered, "I'm so happy!" I wanted you to be the first to know because you have always been my best friend."

The news was like a blow to his heart. "No, you keep the ring as a remembrance of the good times we had together." he said quickly, hoping she would not hear in his voice the deep hurt in his heart.

Now, the memories flooded his mind. When he had left to go back to school, she had given him a warm hug and a kiss and he had held her in his arms, reluctant to leave. Even now, he felt a warm glow just at the thought of it, though then it had brought mixed emotions. He had tried to be happy for her but it was so hard.

Those last few months of school, he filled the hours and days with study and the weekends with activities with friends. At Easter, he came home briefly, using "cramming for exams" as an excuse to stay away from all the places they were used to frequenting.

Graduation brought new beginnings. The effort he put into learning now paid off. He found a good job in Chicago. The city was rich in things to do and places to go and he had made many new friends. Over the busy years, gradually the hurt that had been so deep at first was healed. Eventually he could think of Emilia and the part of his life he had shared with her as a happy time. So he tucked his love for her in one little corner of his heart and kept it there to warm him when he was lonely.

After his father had passed away and then his mother, he was often tired. "It's time to retire." he said to himself. "I'll go back home." And so he did. He fixed up the house and the granary, mowed the lawn and even grew some vegetables. Walking the hedgerows and woodlots with his dog gave him a feeling of peace and joy--a sense of belonging to the earth. Working with old friends and new ones, in organizations like the Cancer and historical societies, he shared his time and companionship. There he felt the love and respect of the dear friends he had made.

And in the winter evenings, when it was cold, like tonight,

he sat in his chair, relaxed, and watched the variegated tongues of fire dancing from the logs and thought. "Thank you, God. Yes, it's been a good life!"