

## BOUND FOR GLORY

They buried her yesterday. The funeral was dreadful, with relatives spewing platitudes and exchanging furtive glances of discomfort. Agnes was in an open casket, looking as pretty as ever, but her skin was as cold as porcelain and her face as vacant as the Arctic tundra. Her stillness reminded him not of a peaceful sleep but of a horrific freeze-frame. A snapshot of someone full of life and vigour now forever frozen in time.

She was his life for forty years. All the excitement, the passion and the wonder of his life he had experienced through her. Perhaps her death was all the more jarring because it had been unexpected. He had always assumed she would outlive him, partly because he was older. Statistics proved it. But Agnes had a weak heart. He knew that but always denied it because she had such a strong personality. Feisty, his son Jack called her. Jack claimed she would outlive them all.

And where was Jack now? Sorry, he'd said, can't make the funeral. Too far. And things were too busy at the plant. Hell, he wasn't being invited to a dinner party; this was his mother's funeral, for God's sake. But that was Jack. He had arranged for a lovely bouquet of orchids to be sent.

Mae, his sister, arrived for a few days.

"How are you, Sid?" she asked melodramatically.

"I don't know," he replied. And that was the truth. He was a caldron of mixed emotions - sadness, anger, regret and

profound emptiness. He didn't know how to express all those feelings at once, so he expressed none. Mae was, as always, supportive and sympathetic, although she tended to treat him like a hurt child. At seventy-two, two years older than Sid, she still considered him her kid brother. She left this morning. Sid had insisted he was fine.

Now he was alone, utterly alone. Just as he wanted to be. He had to have time to think and figure out how he was going to adjust, without family and friends jibber-jabbering about how sorry they were and wondering if there was anything they could do. What could anyone do? It was now time to get on with his life, ...without Agnes.

What kind of a life would it be? Until now, he and Agnes had lived independently in a one-bedroom apartment, interacting little with the other seniors in the building. They had each other for company, and that was enough. On Fridays, they usually went to the Legion for a couple of hours, meeting friends or other people from the building. Sometimes they would go to one of their dances, but Sid's hip had been bothering him lately. Besides, with more young people joining the Legion, the music was getting louder and wilder. At the last dance, they never played any Sinatra or Tony Bennett.

The seniors' building had a community room and a social that he and Agnes occasionally attended. They would join others playing cards or having tea and Agnes would lure him into conversations. He had never gone without Agnes. Most of the

residents were mere acquaintances to him. He would not feel comfortable going without Agnes. He *couldn't* go without her.

Agnes had also done all the grocery shopping, cooking and cleaning. He would now have to do all of that. How would he know what to buy? And what would he have for supper tonight?

Sid knew, regardless of his state of mind, he had to eat. He dragged himself out of the easy chair and mechanically perused the pantry. Having no ambition to cook or to do anything else for that matter, he decided to eat out. Besides, staying here and dwelling on how radically different his lifestyle would now be was only making him depressed. He already felt as empty as an echo in a canyon.

What he needed was to get away from the apartment for a few hours. Perhaps a nice long subway ride downtown would do it. Going there, eating, looking about and coming home could take three or four hours. That would bring him close to bedtime and the end of another day without Agnes.

Sid grabbed his coat and hat, then caught the next bus to the subway station. Standing on the platform, it seemed to him that everyone else waiting for the train was with someone - a spouse, a friend or girlfriend. Except for one young man obviously trying to pick up a pretty girl. She wanted nothing to do with him, which made Sid smile. Agnes had turned him down the first time he asked her out.

Perhaps that was the answer. Perhaps, later on, he should approach some of the single women in his building. God knows,

there are plenty of widows and divorcees living there. He could ask them out just for companionship. But even that did not seem right. Even the thought of dating platonically made him feel like he was cheating on Agnes. He knew he could never remarry or even develop a close friendship with another woman. No one could replace Agnes.

As a train pulled into the station, an announcement came over the P.A.: "This train is out of service. Do not board this train. This train is out of service."

That reminded Sid of an old spiritual folk song called "Bound for Glory". As he waited for another train, he started singing the chorus soft and low:

"This train is bound for glory, this train.  
This train is bound for glory, this train.  
This train is bound for glory, full of the  
righteous, full of the holy.  
This train is bound for glory, this train."

A teenage girl nearby looked him up and down, then turned to her boyfriend with a giggle, no doubt declaring him insane. Better yet, senile. He didn't care. He had had a lifetime of not fitting in and he was used to such behaviour.

As his train arrived, Sid noticed the young couple avoiding him by getting into a different car. He shrugged, then sat down on one of the cold hard seats.

As he replayed the song in his head, Sid wondered about its meaning. He always tried to find meaning or significance in

everyday things, and usually succeeded. Often, he admitted, his views were very subjective. For example, a few weeks ago when he won \$20.00 on a Nevada ticket, he rationalized that he had won because the week before he had misplaced \$20.00. This was God's way of compensating him.

Now, he wondered, was there a specific reason he had left home today and decided to go downtown? After all, he had not been downtown in six months. Given his depression and conflicting emotions, was this short journey intended to help him in some way? Was it supposed to offer answers on how to cope with losing Agnes or how to face the future alone?

That was a tall order for a subway ride, he mused, smiling inwardly. But maybe something would happen downtown to help him figure things out.

He got off near the Eaton Centre, browsing through the mall before returning to Yonge Street to look for a place to eat. He decided on MacDonald's since it was one of the few restaurants where it was socially acceptable to eat alone. It was ironic that a place that promotes itself as a family restaurant would be so popular with people who ate alone.

After collecting his order, Sid took a table near the window. Everyone on the street seemed so cheerful and full of purpose. Except, he noticed, a street person trying to get everyone's attention for a handout. Here was someone definitely down and out. Sid knew he *should* be thinking that this man, at least, was worse off than himself, having to live on the street.

But he didn't. Instead, he felt the street person was fortunate that he had never lost someone he desperately loved for forty years. The beggar had never suffered the way Sid was now suffering. A cloud of depression came over him like a thick fog. He could not see or hear properly. For several minutes, he sat unconscious of his surroundings.

His mind slipped back in time, reliving some of the wonderful times he had shared with Agnes. Once, during their first year of marriage, they decided to take a vacation by simply "going wherever the road may lead". They intentionally drove on the back roads with no destination. Then as darkness descended, they found they were lost and nowhere near civilization. More excited than afraid they stopped, made an open fire then slept in the car. The night was uneventful but in the morning they realized a skunk had also found its way inside the car. The inevitable clash ensued and for the next three hours, they drove with their noses plugged frantically looking for a motel. After checking in to the first one they found, they parked the car at the far end of the lot with the windows down, then spent the next day scrubbing themselves, the car and all its contents. It was a trip the two of them laughed about for many years afterward.

Another time, before they had Jack, they had gone to a nearby beach for the day only to realize when they got there that they had both forgotten their swimsuits. Not wanting to go back, Agnes decided they should walk further down the beach and

find a deserted spot where they could go swimming in the nude without anyone seeing. Excited by the idea of 'skinny-dipping', they found a place where the coastline turned and offered a modicum of privacy. After looking around several times, they undressed and entered the lake. All was going well until they saw a couple with two small children carting their beach gear along the sand and settling near their discarded clothing. Sid and his wife splashed about, wondering what to do. In either direction, were more bathers. Finally, the family went into the water and they surreptitiously swam around them and rushed for their towels when the four were far enough away. They never forgot their bathing suits again.

Another time, they rented a convertible sports car for a weekend, pretending they were wealthy. Later, when they did have more money, they went to Las Vegas, took a Caribbean cruise, hiked on the Bruce Trail and took the Polar Bear Express train up to Moosonee.

When a loud noise from outside brought him back to the present, Sid heaved a deep sigh. Sitting in the restaurant with his meal consumed and nowhere to go, he was compelled to think about what to do next.

He could think of nothing but going home. But what was at home? Nothing but emptiness. Agnes was not there. He would spend the evening alone, then go to bed alone, only to wake up the next day, alone.

Was this what the rest of his life would be? Was this all

he had to look forward to? Who could he turn to for comfort and companionship?

His only son Jack lived five hundred kilometres away. And he was always too busy to visit. There was Agnes' family, but he had never felt they had accepted him unconditionally. The only relative who seemed to care for him was his sister Mae, ...and he couldn't stand her. All that doting and fussing. No. No one would really miss him. If something happened to him.

He paid his token and entered the subway station. As he stood on the platform hearing the young people laughing and joking, he thought about ...it. He believed in an afterlife of some sort. If Agnes had gone on to a better world, why shouldn't he join her? Why should he have to suffer the pain and loneliness of living here without her?

He felt the sudden rush of air that preceded the coming of a train. The wind seemed to be sucking him on to the tracks. He shuddered. What a way to go.

He stepped back and waited as the train pulled in and stopped. With passengers pushing and shoving to get on, then rushing to get a seat, Sid decided he wanted no part of that. He would wait for the next train.

As he waited, Sid thought again of suicide. I've lived my life, he rationalized. I'm retired. Got no job to go to, no one waiting at home for me. No one depending on me for anything. No one'll miss me. And if I don't do it, I've only got an empty apartment to go home to.

Already, his image of the apartment resembled a cocoon. There he would be sucked into an endless rhythm of eating, sleeping and forever living alone. It was like a black hole of despair. All he could think about was the unending loneliness.

He felt the gust of wind once more, signalling another train. He thought quickly and with determination. "I can't go back to that apartment. It's got to be now."

He started to shake and sweat. Looking around, he suddenly realized that the station was quite crowded. This time, however, he saw blank, empty faces on people leading routine vapid lives. They stared vacantly in front of themselves not venturing to look, let alone speak to one another. Zombies, Sid thought. People leading lives without a spark of life. Well, his spark was gone and he did not intend to live another ten years or so as a zombie. He wanted Agnes back. If she could not come to him, he would go to her.

The lights of the train appeared in the tunnel. Patrons mechanically stepped forward. Sid walked a few steps closer to the tunnel, then toward the edge of the platform. He turned to look at the oncoming train, then a smile came across his face. The destination light on the train seemed to read "Bound for Glory".

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The train entered the blackness of the tunnel, slowed, then stopped between stations. Subway riders glanced at their

watches, then looked at one another in frustration. Then the announcement came that the Toronto Transit Commission was experiencing a delay on the line. Emergency crews were on the scene.

One young man in a baseball cap turned to his friend and said, "What do you think happened?"

"Probably a jumper."

"Great. Now we're gonna be late for the Leafs' game."