

(Con't)

When Alyson Mc Cann, the biggest snob at the school, came, Erica felt a strong urge to snub her, but her dad was gracious and kind and danced with her. All of the girls had insisted that he was the most charming man they had ever met. He had complimented his young dance partners on their hair and dresses and danced up a storm with them. Even Alyson said so. "Your dad is gorgeous," she had cooed, "to bad you don't take after him much."

"Poor mom," Erica continued in her daydream, "she only got to dance with him a couple of times that night." But when her parents did dance together, all eyes were on them. Effortlessly her dad was leading her mother across the dance floor. His figure, strong and sure, held his wife gently. His eyes smiled lovingly at her and there seemed to be no one else in the room for him at during that song. They danced as if they were one and hugged each other at the end of the dance. James Lawton had danced nonstop. The long lineup of high school girls and the female teachers who had come to chaperone gave him no time for a breather. Yet at the end of the night he seemed to have energy to spare. He was funny. The girls had not laughed and giggled more at any other school gathering. To Erica's surprise her dad had remembered each of the girl's names as he drove them home, and he was able to recall some little thing about the minutes when he had danced with each of them.

Erica remembered how she had cried a few weeks later at the naval port's dock when her father had to leave on ship for another tour of duty that would take him from home again for several months. He lifted her mom off the ground, hugged and kissed her with abandonment. Then he raised her over his head before he hugged her and smiled his goodbye. "I love you angel," she heard him say again in his rich baritone voice. He had taken her nine year old brother onto his shoulder while holding her in one arm and her mother in the other off the ground and danced with them right there on the dock in front of all those people. His laugh was clear and loving. As if prompted by an unseen hand, Erica's fingers began to glide across the piano keys and summoned a rendition of "Oh Danny Boy" from the instrument. She had heard her father play the rendition on many occasions. Tears started down her cheeks. She stopped to play.

Erica heard the front door open and a few seconds later Justin came running into the living room. He aimed straight for her, slid the last few feet like a baseball player trying to beat a throw to the base. Then she felt his little arms around her. "I love you, mom," he shouted. "Dad bought me and Anita a present and he has a surprise for you too." The six year old rattled off the words in rapid succession before taking a long breath. Justin reached for her hand. He looked up to her. His blue eyes sparkled. A furrow appeared suddenly on his brow. "Why are you crying, mom?" he asked, his voice laden with concern.

"I was thinking of something from long ago, sweetheart," she said, "but now that you are here I'm all right." She gave him a gentle hug.

Justin hopped on to the piano bench, dried her tears with the stained bottom of his shirt, kissed her cheeks and proclaimed, "There, mom, I've kissed it all better. Can you guess what dad got you? Come and see!" He was off the piano bench in a flash, his black curls bouncing as he pulled her by the hand, making her quicken her steps. "I'll give you a clue, mom," Justin laughed. "Anita don't tell," he called to his sister. "It's something for our trip, mom, when we go to visit grandfather Lawton." Justin's smile was gigantic. It was hard for him to contain his excitement. He was eager to see her reaction when she found out what the surprise was. The anticipation to visit his favorite friend, his grandfather, had filled him with hundreds of questions for days, and he had not given any peace until his father and mother had answered each one of them. It had been two years since he had last seen his papa.

But Erica dreaded the trip. Although the last time she had seen her father he and her mother still lived in their own house, she had noticed a change in him then. Since then much had changed. She had received a call from her father one night a little less than two years ago. "I've got some very bad news for you, angel," he had said after his usual greeting. "Your mother has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The doctors give her only a few weeks. It came as such a big shock for us. We've had a terrific summer and your mother had started to make plans for Christmas. Did I tell you that you mom has cancer, sweetheart?" he repeated as if he had no recollection of what they had talked about just a few minutes earlier. Although she had tried to remain upbeat for his sake when he told her of her mother's condition, Erica had broken down then. She wept. She asked questions about her mother, and between tears she tried to gauge her father's state of mind. Erica was convinced that he also was not well when her father said suddenly in response to her sobs, "Do you know about your mother already? Who told you that she is very sick?"

Erica took a leave of absence from her teaching position to be with her parents, after her father's call. Her brother also came whenever he could. He was a big help to her during that time. Five weeks later they laid their mother to rest. During those weeks when they were looking after their parents her brother and she became convinced that their father was suffering from loss of memory. Before she went home she arranged for him to have a thorough checkup. It confirmed that James Lawton had an advanced case of dementia, and his beloved wife's passing seemed to have sped the deterioration of his condition immensely. Before she returned to her own home Erica's brother Andrew, who had a home in a small neighboring city to her parents' home, insisted that their father move to live with him and his family. But that was a long way from Erica's home, and she longed to be closer to him.

The following summer her husband required an operation. By the time he was able to travel the summer break had ended. She had to return to work and Justin entered Kindergarten. Right after Christmas her husband's company required him to travel for several days to one of their mills in a remote part of the country to oversee an installation of new equipment. Erica and the children accompanied him. It was a beautiful part of the country, but the worries about her father kept her from enjoying the time. When the job was finished there was not enough time to visit her father. Now that another school year had ended she would finally be able to fly with Justin to see her father. Her husband would pick her up three weeks later.

Her father's condition had worsened to the extent that Andrew had no longer been able to care for him. Her brother had found a good long-term care facility. Although Mountview Lodge had a waiting list, James Lawton became a resident before the summer began. His condition had placed him in a high priority position. Erica was shocked when she learned of these changes. Andrew had not wanted to worry her about their father's condition during their weekly telephone conversations until it was obvious to her brother that their father needed more care than he could provide. Erica could not imagine her self-sufficient father dependent for most of his needs on strangers.

Armed with a gift-wrapped expensive sweat suit and Justin in the other hand she walked into Mountview Lodge through doors that opened automatically as she approached. She longed to put her arms around her father, but she dreaded to see him in this place. While the lodge and its grounds were immaculately maintained and no effort was spared to make the facility look friendly, warm and like a home, Erica could not get over the reason for the institution. She walked through a tastefully decorated lounge, and noticed a cat snuggled up in a resident's lap. Another visitor sat with a loved one on an expensive sofa by a fireplace. She heard the twitter of birds in a dining area. Justin at her side bounced up and down wanting to see the birds and some of the paintings in the

hallway of farm animals. He pulled her to a stop to examine some sculptures standing in an open area. His many questions were a welcome distraction to her from the sadness she saw in the faces of those for whom all these things were meant and the hopelessness that the bodies propped up in wheelchairs presented to her.

A smiling middle-aged woman in a pleasing uniform pointed her to her father's wing. Erica punched in the code shown under the security box by the door of the wing. An iron click coming from the double doors indicated that she could enter. Once inside she quickly turned to see what she was required to do to exit again. She found her beloved father hunched in a wheelchair near the entrance to a lounge. She had to stop some feet away from him and look closely to make sure she was not mistaken. Andrew had tried to forewarn her, but she could not help but feel shock and pity when she stepped to her father's side. He seemed to be asleep. His hair, once curly and black, was white and cut short and combed straight back. He had lost a lot of weight. His once powerful body looked old and broken. "Dad," she whimpered wrapping her arms around him.

He lifted his head slowly and looked into her eyes. His look was blank. In his eyes she saw the despair of his soul. The blank look after a long minute gave way to a faint smile. "Barbara, is it you?" he whispered.

"No, dad, it's Erica," she sobbed trying desperately to keep her emotions in check. "Look I brought Justin with me. Do you remember Justin?"

His smile broadened. "Erica and Justin," he said slowly. Recognition had come into his eyes. They began to sparkle again. "My little angel. Did I tell you that Barbara, your mom, went away? Until she gets back I've been staying here with your grandmother and grandfather Lawton.

Justin had been bouncing up and down in front of his grandfather. When Erica sat down Justin jumped on his grandfather's lap, he gave him a hug and began talking and laughing faster than a buzzing bee. The trip, his sister Anita, Kindergarten and all the things important to him became instant topics. "Papa, this is a neat chair. Do you want me to take you for a spin in it?" The boy had the brakes of the chair on and off. He turned the wheelchair in a short circle laughing happily until Erica laid her hands gently on him and tried to settle him down.

"Sweetheart, you have to be careful," she said quietly but with force. Grandfather will get dizzy and we mustn't be noisy here."

James Lawton's eyes had followed the boy. His broad smile spoke of pleasure, but he had spoken no word until Erica sat Justin down next to her. Slowly he reached a shaky hand toward the child. "Justin," he said barely above a whisper. "Justin, my dear, dear Justin," for the moment his mind seemed to be clear, "I'm so glad you've come to see me."

"Papa, papa!" Justin shouted exuberantly forgetting his mother's admonitions. "When're you coming to visit us again? We have a swimming pool in our backyard now. You and I could swim all afternoon when you come. It would be so much fun. When can you come?"

"Soon, my child, I'll come. I'll stay awhile too." he spoke slowly and seemed convinced that he could do so at any time he chose. James' eyes clouded over when Erica reprimanded Justin for his outbreak. He turned to Erica with a far away look. In a shaky, quiet voice he continued, "The cardinal doesn't sing anymore." James' hand closed around his daughter's arm. "I want to go home," he begged and Erica felt the longing and pain in his words. "Mom and dad will be worried about me. Can you take me home? I have to tell the folks that the cardinal doesn't sing anymore."

Erica's eyes filled with tears. Justin bounced off his chair and began to chatter to his grandfather again. "Dad is living in his childhood," she said silently and her heart

yearned to take her father to her home and comfort him. “He remembers his childhood and mom’s passing but not what happened an hour ago.”

Her eyes reached out in deep love to the two people so important to her life. “Justin only sees his grandfather as he remembers him. He thinks his papa is here to get well,” she continued to say silently. “All these other poor souls here don’t seem to register with him. His papa is all that matters. How do I tell him?”

She was roused from her thoughts by Justin’s voice. “Mommy, why are you crying?” Justin’s words shook Erica. She sobbed silently and looked at her son through a veil of tears. “I cry for your tomorrow, love,” she whispered and cradled his head in her arms.

“I’ll kiss it all better,” he smiled his boyish, sweet smile at her. His eyes sparkled into hers with unbounded innocence, and he kissed each of her cheeks.

Erica spent most of the time of the weeks’ visit to her brother’s home with her father. They were difficult days full of heartache. Justin kept talking about grandfather coming to visit and her father promised to come, but she knew that it could never again happen.

Each day at the lodge and for a long time after she had returned to her own home, she tried to find hope in the words under one of the pictures hanging in her father’s room at Mountview Lodge, a framed painting her father had bought after his beloved wife had passed away. It was a beautiful, tranquil scene where everything was whole and in the midst of summer. She thought of the words again, after she finished making breakfast for Justin and her husband. “And on that day God himself shall wipe away all tears.”