

## That Which Remains

*Kathleen Fortin*

That which remains is more striking than what is lost. The handful of stories, told over and over, each time not quite the same, slowly turn to fragments of what the original memory used to be. Knowing him long enough to compare makes the difference. To those meeting him for the first time, he may seem fine.

College, military service, friendships lasting decades, a fifty-year marriage, children, and a career with promotions, transfers, closings, and retirement, packed into eighty-one years of life, are reduced to one vignette, another, a third, sometimes up to six depending on the day, each repeated over and over.

A few stories from his prank-filled youth remain. “Once at the Strand Theatre, or was it the Empire,” he’d say, “I shot off a blank gun during the film *Gunga Din*. Ka-boom! When they kicked me out, I don’t think my feet touched the floor.” When will this one no longer be heard?

A stay of several years in Maine—a brief hiatus from the rest of his life lived in his New Hampshire hometown—is a surprisingly frequent setting for stories that remain. Perhaps the move there meant more to him than anyone knew. When he managed the store, his lunch counter was full everyday. The day after he left town to move back home, the counter was empty, a friend told him later. “They treated me like gold,” he’d say, referring to the big going away party thrown for him. “They treated me like gold.”

Then, as if out of nowhere, a black-and-white glossy photo of those partygoers—from well over forty years ago—appears. The photo album, long stored away, will be found in a tussled mess on the bed, the desk, or the workbench in the basement. The extracted photo, pulled from among many others, is seen displayed on the wall of the den where he now spends most of his time.

Fresh tape connects this newly unearthed photo to the bottom of a photo found the week before, which was taped to a recent newspaper obituary of a girlfriend from sixty years ago, which had been taped below a snapshot of his three children playing in the backyard of the house in Maine. All of these pieces hold onto each other tenuously, just as he holds onto them. These chains of photos, interspersed with newspaper and magazine cutouts, disjointed memories, disconnected thoughts, one after the other, fall from frames hung long ago—the framed watercolor cardinal, a Christmas gift from

his children to his bird-loving wife; the framed photograph of their youngest son’s boat with the parasail flying behind it; the framed profiles of his children when they were young.

The large shadow-box frame over the desk, matted in her favorite peach color, houses the 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary photo of his precious soul-mate, tucked in by a few roses preserved from the red cascade that draped her casket and a calligraphied inscription of their only daughter’s eulogy to her. For a long while this frame was untouched, but bit by bit, having run out of room on other walls, he has crowded its sides and bottom with reminiscences of her, of them. Wide and long, it holds a lot: snapshots of her at the beach when they first started dating, the two of them in front of the tall ships in ’76, their bridal party, the word “destiny” ripped from a magazine and even her social security card. These obscure most of the eulogy resting under the glass. Barely peeking through are the words “To My Beloved Wife,” printed on the ribbon that tied the red roses. Pennies, symbolizing her fetish for saving every one she ever found—a Depression-era remnant—are taped near her photos, near what remains of her.

It started out slowly, when he was first alone, and then turned compulsive. Some of the tape is yellowing. Some of the streams of paper are so long they reach the back of the couch or rest on the top of the end table. Under the weight, some pieces of tape have dried and broken, causing the photos to fall sideways, crooking the frame along with them. He has come to calling this room, a place that has become a shrine to all that matters now, to all that can be recalled, his library. Even with no books about, the name fits.

Once, a magazine advertisement for Viagra showing an attractive gray-haired man was found taped to the bottom of the wall calendar in the kitchen, the den having become fully covered. He insisted it was Bill Clinton, whom he remembered meeting. There was no sense arguing over it. One day it was gone, replaced with a photo of his rarely-seen grandchildren.

The kitchen is the new wing of his private gallery. Covering the entire front of the refrigerator are 4x6 magnet frames containing current photos. It’s not clear where these plastic magnets came from; it is presumed he must have bought them a short year ago when he was still driving, shopping, and able to manage his own money, things which are now lost. No matter, for what is important is that which remains. ☞