

End of the Season

by Stephen Russell Payne

With his good shoulder, Harlen pushed the shed door closed against a cold Canadian wind, slid a load of fresh-split kindling off his arm into the wood box. He hung his coat on the rocker in front of the stove, and straightened his back. The scents of baby powder and urine drifted into the kitchen from the living room where Martha lay on the electric hospital bed he'd rented two years before when she lost a leg to a lack of circulation and could no longer climb the stairs. He changed her as often as he could, but trying to keep up with chores, cooking, and housework, he wasn't always fast enough and her bottom got raw. A thin layer of zinc oxide with a dusting of powder usually did the trick.

Harlen rubbed his hands together over the wood stove then took down a diaper from a neat stack on the shelf next to Martha's cookbooks. He liked to keep the medical supplies in the kitchen out of her sight. He walked into the living room, where their Christmas tree still stood at the foot of her bed. She loved to watch the reflections of afternoon sunlight on the tinsel and reminisce about her favorite ornaments. Though it was late February, on days when the air was particularly quiet, she could still catch fleeting whiffs of balsam. He knew it was her last chance to enjoy a Christmas tree, so he planned to go out to the woods and cut her another before this one had shed itself down to bare twigs.

Harlen sat beside the bed, and pulled back the covers. Martha stirred as he undid the adhesive strips holding a diaper around her hips, hips he'd fell in love with just before

The War. Hips he'd held dancing late into summer nights at the Bayside Pavilion. Hips he'd caressed and kissed in the delicate shadows of their young love making.

Martha awakened, pushed herself up into a sitting position. "Sorry," she said, looking a bit sheepish. "I didn't make it to the commode."

"That's all right," he said, sliding a fresh pad under her. It had been months since she'd even tried to maneuver onto the bedside commode by herself.

Sunlight streamed through the south window illuminating her face. "What a beautiful day," she said. "The children must be so excited."

Martha had marked her many years of teaching by the rhythm of her students' seasonal emotions. Each spring she brought her class to the farm for a flower hunt, traipsing through the moist woods searching for Jack-in-the-Pulpits, trilliums, adder tongues and, if they were lucky, a few pink lady slippers hiding deep in the forest.

Martha turned to Harlen. "The Bobwhites are playing in the hockey championship tonight."

It amazed him how she sometimes had these lucid intervals. Like she hadn't lost a single brain cell to the Alzheimer's that had crept in three years before.

"How did you know?"

"It was on the radio while you were out in the shed."

"I think we're playing Hinesburg."

"That's not far," she said. "We should go."

Harlen was surprised. "Are you strong enough?"

After her last heart attack, Martha had gradually gotten weaker, no longer able to do much without precipitating an attack of angina.

“Yes. I had a wonderful nap.”

Harlen heard the gentle puffing of the oxygen apparatus at the head of her bed.

“Been a long time since we’ve seen the Bobwhites play.”

“Let’s go,” Martha said, her eyes brightening. “I’ve got slap-shot fever.”

Harlen smiled. He hadn’t heard that expression in years. “That’s my girl,” he said, touching her thin white hair. Tired, but excited, he thought about what needed to be done.

“I’ll call to see if they’ve any tickets left.”

Martha grinned, laid back against her pillows. “You’ll find some.”

Harlen walked into the kitchen and put a small pot of coffee on to brew. He sat by the wood stove and telephoned his best friend, Albert Thompson, the town fire chief, whose son was the Bobwhite’s hockey coach and grandson one of their star players. Albert was delighted Harlen and Martha thought they could make it to the big game. He said he’d have a couple of firemen meet them at six-thirty at the arena in Hinesburg to help them get to their seats.

Martha rested while Harlen fixed grilled cheese sandwiches. After supper, he connected a full oxygen tank to her wheelchair and laid extra wool blankets inside the seat. He changed her into a double layer of fresh diapers then dressed her in her favorite sweat suit and parka. He feared at any moment she would decide not to go or would forget what they were doing all together, but after supper her energy and enthusiasm rallied even more than before.

Around five-thirty, Harlen parked the pickup as close to the front door as he could and left it running. Back inside, he slid Martha into her wheelchair and wrapped the blankets around her shoulders and remaining leg. He propped the door open with a snow shovel and wheeled her out into the cold night. Supporting her arm and hip, he helped her struggle up onto the seat. He pulled the shovel away from the door and made sure it was closed tight. He lifted her chair into the back, climbed in, and they drove off.

Harlen held Martha's hand on the seat next him on the way to the game. When they arrived, Mike and Nathan, two young firemen, were waiting for them. The arena was a madhouse as hundreds of fans crammed into the bleachers. It had been years since the two high school hockey powerhouses had met in the State Championship, and they both badly wanted their hands on the trophy.

The firemen guided Martha and Harlen up a ramp to the handicapped platform, which, at center ice, had a commanding view of the rink.

"You've got the best seats in the house," Nathan said, locking Martha's chair in place.

"Thank you, boys," she said, watching the players warming up on the ice.

"This was awfully nice of you, fellas," Harlen said. He sat on a folding chair beside Martha.

"Glad to do it," Mike said, motioning toward a section of bleachers below them.

"We'll be sitting right down there if you need anything."

Both teams played a clean, hard-hitting game. At the end of the second period the

score was tied two to two. When the Zamboni came out to resurface the ice, Harlen noticed Martha's breathing was becoming more labored. "You look cold," he said. "Should we go home?"

She smiled. "Not on your life."

He gently rubbed her shoulders and arms with his hands, tucked the woolen blankets in around her, and checked the oxygen tank. "I've got to go to the men's room. I'll be right back."

Harlen made his way through the crowd to the restroom, where it seemed to take forever to relieve himself. He worried about leaving Martha, but he couldn't help it. While everything else seemed to be shrinking, his prostate just kept getting larger.

On the way back to his seat, Harlen paused. Martha looked so small, huddled under the blankets in her wheelchair. It was hard to believe that not so long ago she was the one who couldn't wait to hike into the mountains to go trout fishing on swollen brooks in the spring. The one who pushed him to get his snowshoes on and race her across their frozen fields in the dead of winter. Her diseases had taken her down fast. On her worst days, he sometimes wished her suffering could end, had even contemplated leaving the whole bottle of pain pills within her reach on the bedside stand. But then there were good days like this one when he wished they could live on together forever.

The teams hit the rink for the last period with a new ferocity, their sticks clacking loudly, their skates carving deep gashes in the ice. Opponents checked each other into the boards so hard the rafters shook. With two minutes remaining in the game, the score still tied, the officials called "high sticking" on Hinesburg, sending their best offensive player

to the penalty box. To win, the Bobwhites had to capitalize on their power play advantage.

As the clock ticked down, the Bobwhites pounded the Hinesburg goalie with a barrage of shots, all of which he masterfully blocked. Martha clapped and cheered between breaths from the oxygen tank. The crowd repeatedly leapt to their feet, arms shooting into the air. Several times she tried to rise on her one leg, but she didn't have the strength. Exhausted, she leaned against Harlen.

A Hinesburg player stole the puck and raced toward the Bobwhite's goal. The crowd hushed as he wound up for a shot from just over center ice. Suddenly, Albert's grandson darted out of nowhere, blocked the shot with his body then streaked down the ice on a breakaway. The fans held their breath as he tore past the last Hinesburg defenseman and fired a blistering slap shot over the goalie's outstretched glove into the upper corner of the net.

As the final siren sounded, the Bobwhite crowd exploded. Popcorn, programs, gloves, and winter scarves flew into the air. With great determination, her shoulders trembling, Martha pushed herself up out of her chair. Harlen curved his arm around her waist to steady her as they cheered their victorious team.

"Isn't this wonderful?" she said in a weak voice.

"It is indeed." Harlen kissed her on the cheek then helped her slide back down into her blankets.

As the crowd thinned, the firemen came back and helped Martha and Harlen out of the arena. Mike noticed it was more difficult for Martha to breathe in the cold air. “Do you want to go to the hospital?” he asked.

Martha shook her head, whispered to Harlen, “Take me home. Please.”

Harlen looked at the firemen. “She wants to go home. There’s nothing more they can do.”

“Can we at least give her a ride in our warm ambulance? It’ll be more comfortable.”

Harlen looked at Martha, who nodded. “That would be fine,” he said.

Harlen followed behind the ambulance. Through the arc of windshield wipers clearing wet snow from the glass, he could see Nathan attending to Martha in the back. After all the excitement of the game, it seemed particularly cold and lonely driving home without her next to him.

After the firemen left, Harlen sat with Martha. Though it was a struggle for her to breathe, she managed a smile, motioned for him to come closer. “I want to sleep with you upstairs tonight.”

“Really?” he said. “Can we get you up the stairs?”

“Yes. We’ll leave the oxygen, all this paraphernalia down here.”

For a few moments he stared at the green tubing she had depended upon for so long. “All right. If that’s what you want.”

With her thin arm wrapped around his neck, they managed to slowly climb the stairs. Harlen pulled back the undisturbed covers on Martha’s side of the bed and helped

her slide between the sheets. He climbed in on his side and pulled the comforter up over them.

Martha rolled against him. “Thank you. For everything.”

He curled his arm around her. “It feels so good to be in bed together again.” He kissed her on the forehead. “I love you.”

Martha fell into a restless sleep. Harlen felt her weak heart beating against his chest, her breathing rapid and shallow. Somewhere in the middle of the night, she drew her last breath. Soon her heart stopped.

He thought of getting up, making the necessary calls, but instead lay there holding her until first light, his eyes closed, imagining them dancing down by the lake on a warm summer night.

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