

Down Memory Lane by Mike Resnick

Gwendolyn sticks a finger into her cake, pulls it out, and licks it with a happy smile on her face.

“I like birthdays!” she says, giggling with delight.

I lean over and wipe some frosting off her chin. “Try to be a little neater,” I say. “You wouldn’t want to have to take a bath before you open your present.”

“Present?” she repeats excitedly, her gaze falling on the box with the colorful wrapping paper and the big satin bow. “Is it time for my present now? Is it?”

“Yes, it is,” I answer. I pick up the box and hand it to her. “Happy birthday, Gwendolyn.”

She tears off the paper, shoves the card aside, and opens the box. An instant later she emits a happy squeal and pulls out the rag doll. “This is my very favorite day of my whole life!” she announces.

I sigh and try to hold back my tears.

Gwendolyn is eighty-two years old. She has been my wife for the last sixty of them.

I don’t know where I was when Kennedy was shot. I don’t know what I was doing when the World Trade Center collapsed under the onslaught of two jetliners. But I remember every single detail, every minute, every second, of the day we got the bad news.

“It may not be Alzheimer’s,” said Dr. Castleman. “Alzheimer’s is becoming a catchword for a variety of senile dementias. Eventually we’ll find out exactly which dementia it is, but there’s no question that Gwendolyn is suffering from one of them.”

It wasn’t a surprise—after all, we knew something was wrong; that’s why she was being examined—but it was still a shock.

“Is there any chance of curing it?” I asked, trying to keep my composure.

He shook his head sadly. “Right now we’re barely able to slow it down.”

“How long have I got?” said Gwendolyn, her face grim, her jaw set.

“Physically you’re in fine shape,” said Castleman. “You could live another ten to twenty years.”

“How long before I don’t know who anyone is?” she persisted.

He shrugged helplessly. “It proceeds at different rates with different people. At first you won’t notice any diminution, but before long it will become noticeable, perhaps not to you, but to those around you. And it doesn’t progress in a straight line. One day you’ll find you’ve lost the ability to read, and then, perhaps two months later, you’ll see a newspaper headline, or perhaps a menu in a restaurant, and you’ll read it as easily as you do today. Paul here will be elated and think you’re regaining your capacity, and he’ll call me and tell me about it, but it won’t last. In another day, another hour, another week, the ability will be gone again.”

“Will I know what’s happening to me?”

“That’s almost the only good part of it,” replied Castleman. “You know now what lies ahead of you, but as it progresses you will be less and less aware of any loss of your cognitive abilities. You’ll be understandably bitter at the start, and we’ll put you on anti-depressants, but the day will come when you

no longer need them because you no longer remember that you ever had a greater mental capacity than you possess at that moment.”

She turned to me. “I’m sorry, Paul.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said.

“I’m sorry that you’ll have to watch this happen to me.”

“There must be something we can do, some way we can fight it. . . .” I muttered.

“I’m afraid there isn’t,” said Castleman. “They say there are stages you go through when you know you’re going to die: disbelief, then anger, then self-pity, and finally acceptance. No one’s ever come up with a similar list for the dementias, but in the end what you’re going to have to do is accept it and learn to live with it.”

“How long before I have to go to . . . to wherever I have to go when Paul can’t care for me alone?”

Castleman took a deep breath, let it out, and pursed his lips. “It varies. It could be five or six months, it could be two years, it could be longer. A lot depends on you.”

“On me?” said Gwendolyn.

“As you become more childlike, you will become more curious about things that you no longer know or recognize. Paul tells me you’ve always had a probing mind. Will you be content to sit in front of the television while he’s sleeping or otherwise occupied, or will you feel a need to walk outside and then forget how to get back home? Will you be curious about all the buttons and switches on the kitchen appliances? Two-year-olds can’t open doors or reach kitchen counters, but you will be able to. So, as I say, it depends on you, and that is something no one can predict.” He paused. “And there may be rages.”

“Rages?” I repeated.

“In more than half the cases,” he replied. “She won’t know why she’s so enraged. You will, of course—but you won’t be able to do anything about it. If it happens, we have medications that will help.”

I was so depressed I was thinking of suicide pacts, but Gwendolyn turned to me and said, “Well, Paul, it looks like we have a lot of living to cram into the next few months. I’ve always wanted to take a Caribbean cruise. We’ll stop at the travel agency on the way home.”

That was her reaction to the most horrific news a human being can receive.

I thanked God that I’d had sixty years with her, and I cursed Him for taking away everything that made her the woman I loved before we’d said and done all the things we had wanted to say and do.

She’d been beautiful once. She still was. Physical beauty fades, but inner beauty never does. For sixty years we had lived together, loved together, worked together, played together. We got to where we could finish each other’s sentences, where we knew each other’s tastes better than we knew our own. We had fights—who doesn’t?—but we never once went to bed mad at each other.

We raised three children, two sons and a daughter. One son was killed in Vietnam; the other son and the daughter kept in touch as best they could, but they had their own lives to lead, and they lived many states away.

Gradually our outside social contacts became fewer and fewer; we were all each other needed. And now

I was going to watch the only thing I'd ever truly loved become a little less each day, until there was nothing left but an empty shell.

The cruise went well. We even took the train all the way to the rum factory at the center of Jamaica, and we spent a few days in Miami before flying home. She seemed so normal, so absolutely herself, that I began thinking that maybe Dr. Castleman's diagnosis had been mistaken.

But then it began. There was no single incident that couldn't have occurred fifty years ago, nothing that you couldn't find a reasonable excuse for—but things kept happening. One afternoon she put a roast in the oven, and at dinnertime we found that she'd forgotten to turn the oven on. Two days later we were watching *The Maltese Falcon* for the umpteenth time, and suddenly she couldn't remember who killed Humphrey Bogart's partner. She "discovered" Raymond Chandler, an author she'd loved for years. There were no rages, but there was everything else Dr. Castleman had predicted.

I began counting her pills. She was on five different medications, three of them twice a day. She never skipped them all, but somehow the numbers never came out quite right.

I'd mention a person, a place, an incident, something we'd shared together, and one time out of three she couldn't recall it—and she'd get annoyed when I'd explain that she had forgotten it. In a month it became two out of three times. Then she lost interest in reading. She blamed it on her glasses, but when I took her to get a new prescription, the optometrist tested her and told us that her vision hadn't changed since her last visit two years earlier.

She kept fighting it, trying to stimulate her brain with crossword puzzles, math problems, anything that would cause her to think. But each month the puzzles and problems got a little simpler, and each month she solved a few less than she had the month before. She still loved music, and she still loved leaving seeds out for the birds and watching them come by to feed—but she could no longer hum along with the melodies or identify the birds.

She had never allowed me to keep a gun in the house. It was better, she said, to let thieves steal everything than to get killed in a shootout—they were just possessions; we were all that counted—and I honored her wishes for sixty years. But now I went out and bought a small handgun and a box of bullets, and kept them locked in my desk against the day that she was so far gone she no longer knew who I was. I told myself that when that day occurred, I would put a bullet into her head and another into my own . . . but I knew that I couldn't. Myself, yes; the woman who'd been my life, never.

I met her in college. She was an honor student. I was a not-very-successful jock—third-string defensive end in football, back-up power forward in basketball, big, strong, and dumb—but she saw something in me. I'd noticed her around the campus—she was too good-looking not to notice—but she hung out with the brains, and our paths almost never crossed. The only reason I asked her out the first time was because one of my frat brothers bet me ten dollars she wouldn't give me the time of day. But for some reason I'll never know she said yes, and for the next sixty years I was never willingly out of her presence. When we had money we spent it, and when we didn't have money we were every bit as happy; we just didn't live as well or travel as much. We raised our kids, sent them out into the world, watched one die and two move away to begin their own lives, and wound up the way we'd started—just the two of us.

And now one of us was vanishing, day by day, minute by minute.

One morning she locked the bathroom door and couldn't remember how to unlock it. She was so panicky that she couldn't hear me giving her instructions from the other side. I was on the phone, calling the fire department, when she appeared at my side to ask why I was talking to them and what was burning.

“She had no memory of locking herself in,” I explained to Dr. Castleman the next day. “One moment she couldn’t cope with a lock any three-year-old could manipulate, and the next moment she opened the door and didn’t remember having any problem with it.”

“That’s the way these things progress,” he said.

“How long before she doesn’t know me any more?”

Castleman sighed. “I really don’t know, Paul. You’ve been the most important thing in her life, the most constant thing, so it stands to reason that you’ll be the last thing she forgets.” He sighed again. “It could be a few months, or a few years—or it could be tomorrow.”

“It’s not fair,” I muttered.

“Nobody ever said it was,” he replied. “I had her checked over while she was here, and for what it’s worth she’s in excellent physical health for a woman of her age. Heart and lungs are fine, blood pressure’s normal.”

Of course her blood pressure was normal, I thought bitterly. She didn’t spend most of her waking hours wondering what it would be like when the person she had spent her life with no longer recognized her.

Then I realized that she didn’t spend most of her waking hours thinking of anything, and I felt guilty for pitying myself when she was the one whose mind and memories were racing away at an ever-faster rate.

Two weeks later we went shopping for groceries. She wandered off to get something—ice cream, I think—and when I’d picked up what I needed and went over to the frozen food section she wasn’t there. I looked around, checked out the next few aisles. No luck.

I asked one of the stock girls to check the women’s rest room. It was empty.

I started getting a panicky feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was just about to go out into the parking lot to look for her when a cop brought her into the store, leading her very gently by the arm.

“She was wandering around looking for her car,” he explained. “A 1961 Nash Rambler.”

“We haven’t owned that car in forty years or more,” I said. I turned to Gwendolyn. “Are you all right?”

Her face was streaked by tears. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t remember where we parked the car.”

“It’s all right,” I said.

She kept crying and telling me how sorry she was. Pretty soon everyone was staring, and the store manager asked if I’d like to take her to his office and let her sit down. I thanked him and the cop, but decided she’d be better off at home, so I led her out to the Ford we’d owned for the past five years and drove her home.

As we pulled into the garage and got out of the car, she stood back and looked at it.

“What a pretty car,” she said. “Whose is it?”

“They’re not sure of anything,” said Dr. Castleman. “But they think it’s got something to do with the amyloid beta protein. An abundance of it can usually be found in people suffering from Alzheimer’s or Down Syndrome.”

“Can’t you take it out, or do something to neutralize it?” I asked.

Gwendolyn sat in a chair, staring at the wall. We could have been ten thousand miles away as far as she was concerned.

“If it was that simple, they’d have done it.”

“So it’s a protein,” I said. “Does it come in some kind of food? Is there something she shouldn’t be eating?”

He shook his head. “There are all kinds of proteins. This is one you’re born with.”

“Is it in the brain?”

“Initially it’s in the spinal fluid.”

“Well, can’t you drain it out?” I persisted.

He sighed. “By the time we know it’s a problem in a particular individual, it’s too late. It forms plaques on the brain, and once that happens, the disease is irreversible.” He paused wearily. “At least it’s irreversible today. Someday they’ll cure it. They should be able to slow it down before too long. I wouldn’t be surprised to see it eradicated within a quarter of a century. There may even come a day when they can test embryos for an amyloid beta imbalance and correct it in utero. They’re making progress.”

“But not in time to help Gwendolyn.”

“No, not in time to help Gwendolyn.”

Gradually, over the next few months, she became totally unaware that she even had Alzheimer’s. She no longer read, but she watched the television incessantly. She especially liked children’s shows and cartoons. I would come into the room and hear the eighty-two-year-old woman I loved singing along with the Mickey Mouse Club. I had a feeling that if they still ran test patterns she could watch one for hours on end.

And then came the morning I had known would come: I was fixing her breakfast—some cereal she’d seen advertised on television—and she looked up at me, and I could tell that she no longer knew who I was. Oh, she wasn’t afraid of me, or even curious, but there was absolutely no spark of recognition.

The next day I moved her into a home that specialized in the senile dementias.

“I’m sorry, Paul,” said Dr. Castleman. “But it really is for the best. She needs professional care. You’ve lost weight, you’re not getting any sleep, and to be blunt, it no longer makes any difference to her who feeds and cleans and medicates her.”

“Well, it makes a difference to me,” I said angrily. “They treat her like an infant!”

“That’s what she’s become.”

“She’s been there two weeks, and I haven’t seen them try—really try—to communicate with her.”

“She has nothing to say, Paul.”

“It’s there,” I said. “It’s somewhere inside her brain.”

“Her brain isn’t what it once was,” said Castleman. “You have to face up to that.”

“I took her there too soon,” I said. “There must be a way to connect with her.”

“You’re an adult, and despite her appearance, she’s a four-year-old child,” said Castleman gently. “You no longer have anything in common.”

“We have a lifetime in common!” I snapped.

I couldn’t listen to any more, so I got up and stalked out of his office.

I decided that depending on Dr. Castleman was a dead end, and I began visiting other specialists. They all told me pretty much the same thing. One of them even showed me his lab, where they were doing all kinds of chemical experiments on the amyloid beta protein and a number of other things. It was encouraging, but nothing was going to happen fast enough to cure Gwendolyn.

Two or three times each day I picked up that pistol I’d bought and toyed with ending it, but I kept thinking: what if there’s a miracle—medical, religious, whatever kind? What if she becomes Gwendolyn again? She’ll be all alone with a bunch of senile old men and women, and I’ll have deserted her.

So I couldn’t kill myself, and I couldn’t help her, and I couldn’t just stand by and watch her. Somehow, somewhere, there had to be a way to connect with her, to communicate on the same level again. We’d faced some pretty terrible problems together—losing a son, suffering a miscarriage, watching each of our parents die in turn—and as long as we were together we were able to overcome them. This was just one more problem—and every problem is capable of solution.

I found the solution, too. It wasn’t where I expected, and it certainly wasn’t what I expected, but she was eighty-two years old and sinking fast, and I didn’t hesitate.

That’s where things stand this evening. Earlier today I bought this notebook, and this marks the end of my first entry.

Friday, June 22. I’d heard about the clinic while I was learning everything I could about the disease. The government outlawed it and shut it down, so they moved it lock, stock and barrel to Guatemala. It wasn’t much to look at, but then, I wasn’t expecting much. Just a miracle of a different sort.

They make no bones about what they anticipate if the experiment goes as planned. That’s why they only accept terminal patients—and because they have so few and are so desperate for volunteers, that’s also why they didn’t challenge me when I told them I had a slow-acting cancer. I signed a release that probably wouldn’t hold up in any court of law outside Guatemala; they now have my permission to do just about anything they want to me.

Saturday, June 23. So it begins. I thought they’d inject it into my spine, but instead they went through the carotid artery in my neck. Makes sense; it’s the conduit between the spine and the brain. If anything’s going to get the protein where it can do its work, that’s the ticket. I thought it would hurt like hell, but it’s just a little sore. Except for that, I don’t feel any different.

Wednesday, June 27. Fourth day in a row of tedious lectures explaining how some of us will die but a few may be saved and all humanity will benefit, or something like that. Now I have an inkling of how lab rats and guinea pigs feel. They’re not aware that they’re dying; and I guess before too long, we won’t be either.

Wednesday, July 3. After a week of having me play with the most idiotic puzzles, they tell me that I’ve lost 6 percent of my cognitive functions and that the condition is accelerating. It seems to please them no end. I’m not convinced; I think if they’d give me a little more time I’d do better on these damned tests. I

mean, it's been a long time since I was in school. I'm out of practice.

Sunday, July 7. You know, I think it's working. I was reading down in the lounge, and for the longest time I couldn't remember where my room was. Good. The faster it works, the better. I've got a lot of catching up to do.

Tuesday, July 16. Today we got another talking-to. They say the shots are stronger and the symptoms are appearing even faster than they'd hoped, and it's almost time to try the anecdote. Anecdote. Is that the right word?

Friday, July 26. Boy am I lucky. At the last minute I remembered why I went there in the first place. I waited until it was dark and snuck out. When I got to the airport I didn't have any money, but they asked to see my wallet and took out this plastic card and did something with it and said it was OK and gave me a ticket.

Saturday, July 27. I wrote down my address so I wouldn't forget, and boy am I lucky I did, because when I got a cab at the airport I couldn't remember what to tell him. We drove and we drove and finally I remembered I had written it down, but when we got home I didn't have a key. I started pounding on the door, but no one was there to let me in, and finally they came with a loud siren and took me somewhere else. I can't stay long. I have to find Gwendolyn before it is too late, but I can't remember what it would be too late for.

Mundy, August. He says his name is Doctor Kasleman and that I know him, and he kept saying to Paul why did you do this to yourself, and I told him I didn't remember but I know I had a reason and it had something to do with Gwendolyn. Do you remember her he said. Of course I do I said, she is my love and my life. I ask when can I see her & he said soon.

Wednesday. They gave me my own room, but I don't want my own room I want to be with Gwendolyn. Finally they let me see her and she was as beautiful as ever and I wanted to hug her and kiss her but when I walked up to her she started crying and the nurse took her away.

It has been 8 days since I wrote here. Or maybe 9. I keep forgetting to. Today I saw a pretty little girl in the hall, with pretty white hair. She reminds me of someone but I don't know who. Tomorrow if I remember I will bring her a present.

I saw the pretty girl again today. I took a flower from a pot and gave it to her and she smiled and said thank you and we talked a lot and she said I am so glad we met & I am finally happy. I said so am I. I think we are going to be great friends because we like each other and have so much in common. I asked her name and she couldn't remember, so I will call her Gwendolyn. I think I know someone called Gwendolyn once a long time ago and it is a very pretty name for a very pretty new friend.