

# DEFRAG

George Opacic

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The clean white Oldsmobile sedately bumps onto its concrete driveway, rolling to a stop. The driver, Mrs. McCane, gathers her purse, a small bag of groceries and a paper bag from

The radio announces that there will be "a \$200 per month increase in the cost of senior's residence fees".

, from

"Oh my. What is Eva going to do? She can't afford to buy shoes, as it is. Those slippers are already run ragged."

, from the drug store.

"What did I buy there?... Oh, yes, coated aspirin. What did Darlene call them? Esoteric? Ascetic? Enteric? She's such a dear... Is today Thursday? No. Wednesday. If Luke can go to his karate class, Darlene should drop by. Tomorrow." She nods in anticipation. Her pure smile goes well with her tied-back light silver hair.

Mrs. McCane opens the door to get out. She is feeling extremely weak, today – can't get out.

"Oh! The darn seat belt! Senile old thing!"

She lets go of the bags to unlatch the belt.

In the foyer, Mrs. McCane slips off her shoes, putting her key-ring on a glass table. She pauses with her hand on the key-ring, she sees her late husband through cloudy eyes, as he gives her the key-ring; that was the last time they visited the Tiffany Room dance hall. Slowly turning as if dancing, she carries the bags into the kitchen.

"Hello Home. Did you miss me?"

She puts the little carton of milk in the fridge.

"If Annie can come down for the weekend with Jim,"

She sits at the table, absently adjusting the table-cloth under the plastic bag that still has bread in it.

"then I'd like to tell her about  
her great-grandmother. The brooch"

She gets up quickly and heads for the bedroom. She opens a jewellery box that is on the chest-of-drawers beside her bed. Before it is fully open, she slows down, giving the box the respect which it is due.

"My Box of Memories," she says, caressing the wood lid and its needlepoint top.

It has sections overflowing with rings and brooches and gold chains and imitation gold chains and ear-rings and pins. She sees, instead, faces, rooms, family gatherings, homes, dance halls, friends, parks.

"Now where's that cluster of pearls?"

She digs deeper, finding a brooch with tiny rubies and emeralds encircling a cluster of seven small white pearls with one larger black pearl in the middle. The gold base can hardly be seen for the gems.

Reciting, "The brooch... I remember Mother wearing this brooch on the most *important* occasions. It was given to her by Father on their tenth anniversary. I was just seven but I remember it like it was yesterday. A family party had been arranged – partly for the anniversary and partly for, for my cousin Reginald, who had been very badly injured in the war – the Great War. We needed, I remember, to keep up his spirits – I think, after growing up I understood this better – we needed to find ways to give him food and money and clothes because he couldn't do for himself because of those terrible injuries."

Mrs. McCane replaces the brooch, putting it under a shelf in the jewellery box to better protect it. She closes the lid carefully. It barely fits everything.

Going back to the kitchen, she sees that the bread is still on the table.

"Oh dear. I *am* getting forgetful these days."

She puts the bread in the fridge, then wraps up the plastic bag, putting it into a drawer that is already full of loosely tied plastic bags.

"Father... he didn't like Reginald. I suppose he thought the poor fellow should have grown new limbs and gone to work someplace...."

"Mother loved that brooch. When she gave it to me for my graduation from college, I remember her hands trembling. Her lovely long fingers gently held the brooch as if it were a frog about to jump back into the pond..."

"Reginald was a poor lost soul. Mother tried to help him as much as she could. I remember how she'd get the cook to bake up Shepherd's Pie and then get the gardener to take it over to Reginald's apartment on Buttergrove St. When Father found out, one time, there was an argument. 'You're just encouraging him,' he said. 'To do what', she said, 'to eat? He's my late sister's only son! Do you want me to let him starve to death?' - *doorbell* - "But if you keep doing this, he'll never be able to stand...' 'What?' Mother said, 'Stand'" - *doorbell* - "on his own two feet? He's only been left with a half a leg! In the service" - *doorbell, doorbell* - "of his country!"

"Oh dear, was that the doorbell?"

Mrs. McCane gets up slowly. "Mustn't sit for so long. These old joints just seize up." She glances at - *doorbell* - the clock. "JUST A MINUTE! BE RIGHT THERE!" she sings out. "It can't be after five o'clock already. I just got home at two thirty. JUST A MINUTE!"

The walk to the door loosens her muscles. She opens the door, then remembers that she should have looked to see who it was. "Too late, anyway... Annie! And Jim! I'm so very pleased to see you both! I was just thinking how nice it would be if you could drop in for a while. How are you?"

Annie falls into her arms and they hug each other. Jim stands back, giving them time to say hi. "Come here, Jim. Give your old mother a kiss." Jim's kiss is pro forma.

"Mom, how have you been keeping? I'm always wondering how you're doing way down here..."

"Oh, pushah. You know that I have some wonderful friends, here, Jimmy. And, and I can take care of myself perfectly well." She pats Jim's chest as he backs away after their brief kiss. Her last pat misses him.

Mrs. McCane grins brightly at her great-granddaughter. "So, Annie. You're almost as tall as I am! Soon I'm going to have to bend my neck to look up at you! Your granny is delighted at how you're growing!"

"Oh, Gramma! I *hate* this dress! It makes me look like a little kid!"

"Nonsense, dear. It's a lovely dress and you look perfectly adorable in it!"

"But I don't *want* to look adorable! I want to look... like, like, older!"

"Soon enough, Annie. Soon enough. Try to enjoy your youth while you can."

Annie scoots into the kitchen, followed by her great-grandmother. "Annie! Come back here and take your shoes off!" orders Jim. He tosses off his own shoes loudly under the glass table. Jumping back on one foot, Annie pulls off her shoes and plops them onto grandad's.

Mrs. McCane tops up the teakettle.

"Mom, don't go to any trouble for me. I can only stay for a few minutes. If you don't mind, I'd like to leave Annie here for a while. I have to go out, and Celine is out of town on another business trip. Do you mind?"

"Oh, not at all, Jimmy. I'm always delighted to have Annie's company. Is there a hockey game on tonight?" she asks with a hint of a grin.

"Ah, yes. The guys asked if I could tag along, tonight..."

"With your season's ticket. Oh, don't worry! I won't tell Celine." Mrs. McCane winks at her great-granddaughter. To her son, "And how is Celine doing? Sounds like she's keeping very busy, as usual?"

"She has a great job – great salary, and all. But it *does* take her out of town a lot..." Jim gets up to help with the sugar bowl and milk – a good excuse to change the subject.

Mrs. McCane pours the hot water into a teapot. She carefully brings it to the table, placing it on a doily. Jim puts the milk and sugar on the table. She gets the cups and a spoon.

"Annie, I've got some milk, if you'd like, or I can make up the orange juice..."

"I'll have milk, thanks, Gramma."

"Now." Mrs. McCane smiles brightly. "I've got some cookies that I just made yesterday – the jumbo chocolate cookies that you always like, Jimmy. And, if Annie's been a good girl, maybe she can have some, too?"

Annie perks up, and so does Jim.

"Yes please, Gramma. I've been a very good girl, haven't I grampa?"

They chat and munch.

Mrs. McCane comes back into the living room. Jim has left for his hockey game.

Annie curls up on the couch and is about to turn on the television. The changer doesn't work.

"Gramma! What's wrong with the TV?"

Mrs. McCane pats the batteries in her apron pocket. "Oh dear! I don't know. Well, anyway, I wanted to have us quietly sit and have a conversation, tonight. I'll see if I can fix the TV later."

Annie rolls her eyes, then shifts over to let Mrs. McCane sit beside her.

"Like, about what, Gramma – not the birds and the bees thing again?"

Mrs. McCane smiles. "No, Annie. I guess you already know about the birds and the bees, do you?"

"Yeah. Mom, younger-gramma, gave me the lecture last weekend. I already know all that stuff."

"I'm sure you do, Annie. But your grandmother will probably want to go over a few things with you, later."

"Yeah. She said there was some other stuff she didn't have time to tell me, yet. Next weekend she's free, I guess."

Annie shifts, getting more comfortable – and changing the subject. "What are we going to talk about, Gramma? Maybe *I* can look at the TV for you?"

"No, I'll fix it later, Annie. Thank you... I just thought I might take the time to tell you about your *great-great-grandmother*. You never knew her, of course, and you should know something about your family." Mrs. McCane nods encouragingly at Annie.

"Ok."

"Let me get my photo album. There are some very nice pictures of *my* mother and father in there." Annie looks at Mrs. McCane in wonder.

"Oh. Yeah! *You* had a mother and father!"

"Yes, dear. That's the way it works. *Everybody* is given a set of parents, as a start. I'll be right back..." Mrs. McCane rocks a couple times to get out of the couch, then disappears into her bedroom.

Coming back, she has an old photo album held carefully in both hands. She gives the album to Annie while she settles back down into the couch.

"There... Now, let me show you who's in here..."

Taking back the album gently, Mrs. McCane places it half on her knee and half on Annie's.

"Now, this first picture is Mother. *My* Mother, your great-great-grandmother. She was a lovely lady, wasn't she?" The old sepia photograph has complex die-cut edges. A sharp-edged wrinkle extends across the bottom of the picture, going through her lap.

Mother's light-coloured curly hair is held down by a frilly and decorated hat. While her pose is of the severe mug-shot style, Mother's bright eyes see through the ages into your heart.

Annie looks from the picture to Mrs. McCane. "Yeah! You have the same eyes and your chin... She looks tougher, Gramma. I mean..."

Summer breeze caressing window shears... the smell of, of, peppermint! And ginger!  
"Mary! Come here, now. I want you to read to me from Mr. Shelley's book... Come on down..."

"more strict. She *is* lovely,

Gramma. Gramma?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear. I was just remembering our house, and Mother. She taught me to read very early. Percy Bysshe Shelley... Have you taken Shelley in school, yet, Annie?"

Trying hard, "Noo, is he on television?"

"No dear. Shelley was a *poet* from long ago.

The fountains mingle with the river  
And the rivers with the Ocean,  
The winds of Heaven mix for ever  
With a sweet emotion;  
Nothing in the world is single;  
All things by a law divine  
In one spirit meet and mingle.  
Why not I with thine?"

"That's nice, Gramma. What's it mean?"

"He was speaking about, *love*, Annie, dear. He said that everything in the world comes together in pairs, and that, when they do, they should be forever one, in spirit..."

"Gramma, don't cry..." Annie has tears in her eyes, too, and doesn't know why.

Mrs. McCane pulls a tissue from her apron pocket. She dabs her eyes, then sees that Annie needs dabbing, too.

"Well." She folds up the album. "Annie, please be a dear and fetch me my jewellery box. Do you know where it is – on my dresser?"

Happy to be in action, Annie jumps off the couch. "Yes, Gramma. I know right where it is."

Bringing it back, "Umh! It's heavy, Gramma!" Annie lugs it back to the couch, trying very hard to keep it level.

Mrs. McCane takes it from her and puts it on her lap. Annie sits back down.

Opening the lid slowly, "This is my Box of Memories. Each piece in here is very special in its own way." She draws up a light, gold-coloured chain. "This chain was given to me by your late great-grandfather, when we were first dating. It came with a heart-shaped trinket that got lost, I don't know when. I haven't used the chain for anything, since, but it brings back some wonderful memories..."

Whirling, whirling to band music that made your heart and your diaphragm beat right along – the slippery wooden dance floor with that special smell of, of, wax? No, it was a powder...

"Gramma? Were you going to show me something?" Annie knew that when Gramma's eyes went like that, and she smiled quietly, that it was nice for her but Annie wanted to get this over with so that she could watch TV.

"Yes, dear, I was." She digs out the brooch. "Mother loved this brooch. When she gave it to me for my graduation from college, I remember her hands trembling. Her lovely long fingers gently held the brooch as if it were a frog about to jump back into the pond..."

Mrs. McCane smiles at Annie as she holds the brooch. "I remember Mother wearing this brooch on the most *important* occasions. It was given to her by Father on their tenth anniversary. I was just seven but I remember it like it was yesterday. A family party had been arranged – partly for the anniversary and partly for, for my cousin Reginald, who had been very badly injured in the war – the Great War."



"It has shiny stones all around it. And, and... seven white balls around a grey one."

"Yes, dear. Those red stones are called rubies and the green ones are emeralds. They're very expensive. And even more expensive are the white pearls. And more expensive, yet, is the black pearl in the middle. But the most *very* expensive part of the brooch is the gold that holds it all together... There. See how heavy it is?"

She puts it into Annie's hand.

"Ohh! It *is* heavy! It doesn't *look* that heavy."

Mrs. McCane carefully picks the brooch up, holding it in front of them between her fingers. "And, you know, Annie, what is even more valuable than all that?"

Annie shakes her head.

"The memories. The memories in this brooch are beyond dollars. If I didn't have this brooch to remind me, every once in a while, I might, I might, forget..."

She cries.

Annie joins her, frightened, because she doesn't know why they are crying.

Mrs. McCane settles down. She holds Annie in a loving hug.

"Annie. When your grampa gets back I'm going to give him my car."

Confused. Annie shrugs, "But we already have two cars, Gramma. He doesn't need it and he's going to drive here with his own car. I don't know what you mean, Gramma."

"There's one more thing that I want to put in this Box of Memories, before I lose it. The key-ring. And I can't put it in here if I still need it to hold my car keys."

Mrs. McCane sits up straight, looking at the wall. "I don't need to drive anymore. All my friends take the bus, or taxi. Why, Eva doesn't even have a pair of shoes any more. I'm going to stop driving. Before I lose my key-ring."

"Now. Lets look through this box and see if we can take something out that I don't need any more. Otherwise, there won't be enough room for the key-ring."

She rummages through laced parlours and the sea voyage they took for their honeymoon, and the apple tree over in their neighbour's field that had that one branch that

always had humongous apples, and only that one branch, and her girl friend at college who married a motorcycle rider!...

"Grandma? Are you looking for something special?"

"Yes, Annie, I was.. ah! Here it is! This ring. A student gave it to me while I was teaching at that little school in Morley, Alberta. It was so long ago, I can't even remember the student... Anyway. I want you to have this ring, Annie. It is a very nice ring, don't you think?"

The silver had been recently cleaned, so that the finely worked strands of silver could be seen winding around each other.

"Gee, thanks a lot, Grandma. I don't have a ring like this. Now can we watch TV? I'm missing a really good show."

"Yes dear. You're welcome. I think the changer just needs batteries. See if these fit." She pulls out the two batteries from her apron.

Mrs. McCane gives her great-grand-daughter a light kiss through her curly hair on her temple.