

Home is Not a Place

Tears dampen my cheeks as I turn fragile pages filled with photos of the homes and loved ones of my life. I close the tattered album and hug it against my heart.

I caress the worn leather and place the book on an old end table found at a yard sale, one of a smattering of impersonal belongings that furnish the room. A mechanical bed, a flat-screen TV on a plain white dresser and a used recliner left by the previous occupant. I've been at Rosewood Care Center for two months now, but I can't bring myself to call this closet-sized room home.

The house Edna and I shared for four decades hadn't felt like home either. Not after my angel passed. Without my wife of fifty-seven years, it was just a house, and this is just a room for an aging old man. A shoebox, really. A safe place for an injured field mouse.

From the blue velvet recliner, I stare out the small window at a weathered mural painted on the wooden fence. My entire view of the world encompassed in a faded six-by-six painting of crop rows and grain silos. A cruel tease for a trapped mouse.

At a rapping on the door, I quickly blot my tears with a tissue. "Come in." I grimace at the thought of someone peeking under the lid of my shoebox.

Claire, my granddaughter, rushes in and gives me a hug. She's on her way to the hair salon. Her kindergartener, Milly, slips in like a ray of sunshine, with honey-gold freckles and two bouncing ponytails. She will be my entertainment for the next hour.

A change of pace from my usual eat-and-nap routine, although I'm sure I'll need an extra nap later.

Milly waves at her mom, then turns and leans against the closed door. I follow her gaze as it skips across the room. I wonder what a five-year-old could possibly find interesting here. When Edna and I had a home, there were toys and books for the wee ones, but this isn't my home.

Her focus flits from the black TV screen to the controls of my electric recliner. She bites her bottom lip and steps up, her hands curled into fidgeting fists that seem to itch to touch the buttons. "What's it do?"

"Well, it doesn't turn on the TV." I glance at the buttons with a nod of permission. Her fists unfurl. A purple nailed finger presses each button in a random sequence. She raises my feet, lays me back, then sits me up until I'm almost standing. Fortunately, there's no eject button, or I'd be hanging from the light fixture.

Apparently satisfied or perhaps bored, she wiggles her way behind my chair, reappearing beside the bed, one hand on the wall and one extended, like she's walking a tightrope. She peeks into the bathroom and disappears. Within seconds, the on-duty care center attendant dashes into my room.

"Everything okay, Mr. Phelps?" She scowls at the peculiar angle of my recliner, then with a scrunched face of puzzlement, she says, "Your shower alarm went off."

I grimace and wave her into the bathroom just as Milly peeks around the edge of the door.

"Meet my great-granddaughter, Nosey Nelly."

"Not Nelly. I'm Nosey Milly." She stomps across the room and plants an elbow on the arm of my chair. Her feet cross cowboy style like she's been leaning there all day watching the sunrise. I lean forward, expecting to see a length of straw between her

teeth.

The attendant nods knowingly. “Nice to meet you, Milly.” She waggles a finger. “No more tugging on the shower alarm cord. That’s for emergencies only.”

“What kind’a ‘mergency? Case the shower’s on fire?” She taps my chair’s *recline* button and glances innocently at the ceiling.

I pop my eyes and mouth wide open, like I’m in shock. She giggles and taps it again. I jolt and shimmy, Frankenstein style.

The attendant shakes her head and leaves. Milly soon tires of my phony antics and climbs onto my lap, tickling my senses with a sweet memory of Edna’s lavender scented shampoo.

She continues to jab the controls, pushing the *stand* button until she slides to the floor. I cling to the armrests. If I let go to press the button, I’ll likely join her in a heap of old bones and weak joints.

“Milly, sit me back down. I don’t stand so good these days.” She leaps up and lowers my chair, pressing the button until I’m laid out flat, staring at the ceiling. At least I can manage the buttons from here without risking a broken hip.

She glances around the room with eyes as green as my Edna’s. Obviously seeking new entertainment, she squats beside the bed and leans over until one strawberry blonde ponytail sweeps the floor. The wheels under my adjustable bed appear to be of interest. She pops up, smooths her hands across my quilt and focuses on the pillow. Probably looking for a steering wheel.

Oh, what a joy ride that would be.

“Milly, dear, bring that book over here, please.” I point at the photo album on the

end table.

She grabs the heavy, leather-bound book, climbs back onto my lap, and nestles in. “What’s the story ‘bout, Gramps?”

I open to the first page, and she leans close, a finger pressed below a black-and-white photo of a boy about her own age. “Who’s that?”

“That’s me, all dressed up for Easter Sunday.” I stroke a picture of my parents. “And that’s my mommy and daddy. They were my angels, but they’re in heaven now.”

“Gramps, where was your home?”

“Well, little one, that is a question about angels.” Milly looks up at the ceiling like she’s expecting Gabriel to join us for a chat. “When I was about your age, my home was in the Smokey Mountains where Daddy worked in a lumber mill.”

“Did your mommy work in the number mill?” She taps the face of my favorite angel.

I swallow back a chuckle. “No, but she worked very hard, tending the garden, sewing our clothes, and reading stories to me and my brother.” The memories taste sweet as I twist a silky ponytail between my fingers.

“Was your home a’ways in the Mokey Mountains?”

I think about the many forgotten houses of my childhood. “No. We moved all over the country. But home was wherever Mommy and Daddy lived.”

“Cause they were your angels?”

I pull Milly close. “Yes, because they were my angels.”

She looks into my eyes, her little forehead creased with worry. “Gramps, where’s your home now?”

The concern in her expression washes over me like a wave. I swallow hard.
“Sweetheart, as long as you visit me here, this will be my home.”

She studies the photo of my parents. “But where’s your angels?”

I clench a fist to my chest. “Right here in my heart. And if I want to see them, I open this book.” I kiss a finger tip and press it to the picture.

“Gramps?” Milly looks at me thoughtfully. “Will you be my angel?”

“Forever and always.” I squeeze her tight and rap a fist on her heart. “I’ll always be right there.” Her frown surprises me. “Why the sad face?”

“What if I wanna see you?” Her eyebrows scrunch together and her lower lip quivers in an adorable pout.

I start to say she can come visit me any time until I notice one small finger tapping on my mother’s face. “Well, I think we can solve that.”

Carefully, I flip to the last page of the album and remove a photo. “Would this help?”

Milly’s eyes light up. She snatches the picture of me dressed in my Sunday suit and presses it to her heart. “My angel!”

Following a soft tap on the door, Claire slips into the room, flaunting a new hairdo. “I hope she wasn’t too much trouble.”

With a wry smile, I kiss the top of Milly’s head. “No trouble at all.”

I am exhausted, but my heart is warm. “Claire, would you mind bringing a basket of books and toys the next time you visit?”

Two weeks later, Milly is once again dropped off to entertain me. She dashes

through the door wafting sunshine. “Look, Gramps. I have an angel book!” She opens the first page of a small photo album, kisses a fingertip, and presses it to my picture.

“You’re my first angel.”

She flips through the pages, finger-tap kissing her mommy, her daddy, and all of her angels.

I sigh and scan the room through a kaleidoscope of tears. This *is* my home. I’m not an injured mouse hidden away for safekeeping. Home is not a place, it’s a who, and I have angels.

I hope you enjoyed this story, and I hope *you* have an angel book.

