

Twenty years into the future

They walked down the street of the Scottsdale Quarter, arm in arm. The man wore a ball cap from some island in the Caribbean, his close-cropped, pure white hair trimming the bottom edge of the stark white cap. He had on a rolled collar grey sweater covering a light green shirt and a solid dark tie, a pair of old corduroy dress slacks, and off-brand pair of brown loafers. The slacks were covering a pair of calf-high support socks which helped his aged heart circulate the blood back up out of his legs except they had rolled down to the top of his shoes. The problem was, it made his feet cold. He was also carrying his wife's purse. When her arthritis acted up, she couldn't close her hands to grip anything, including her own purse. When they were younger, she used to carry big purses, of bright colors—big enough to carry shoes in, maybe a sweater, and so colorful, her husband joked for years about the bags being rescue beacons the Coast Guard could see for miles. But as the years progressed, the heaviness of it hurt her shoulders. The purses began to get progressively smaller and more subdued in color.

But not too subdued.

He didn't mind helping her. He never minded carrying his wife's "luggage" he would call it around his friends. He had been doing it for the last decade, or had it been two decades? He had lost count. At his age, he always lost count.

She was wearing a light sweater and slacks to match. She wore gloves because her circulation was not getting any better, and her hands were constantly cold. She had a cotton scarf around her neck and an ear "cozy," he called it, around her ears, a headband snow skiers used to protect against the cold wind. She would often stuff chunks of cotton in her ears to help keep them warm when the two of them went out for the evening. He made her wear the cozy because it would remind her about the cotton in her ears. When they went into a restaurant, she would pull out the cotton, if she remembered she had them in, and place them on the table. Chunks of cotton, sitting in his wife's ears, now sitting on the table they were going to eat on, bothered him, but forgetting they were in her ears was worse. The thought of earwax made him squeamish, even though his wife, as well as himself, were always impeccably dressed. When he was younger, there were times he would shower three times a day, but the earwax thing bothered him greatly. It always had. Clowns bothered him as well. Not a lot else worked the man, but earwax and clowns did. Earwax in clowns' ears was beyond comprehension.

After an early dinner, the couple loved to window shop, go see a movie, or sit in the window seats of one of the restaurants near the splash pad area in the center of the Scottsdale Quarter, a once stylish mall when it had opened decades before. The couple started coming to this location then and simply kept the habit going. They made it a frequent destination over the years, for dinner, shopping, or simply to watch people and their children play in the water, even this late in the season. She would drink an iced tea and he would drink a diet soda. The sugar wasn't good for his stomach, and he overlooked the sodium. Sometimes they would go an hour without saying anything, and then she would say something. It was always she who started the conversation—always.

They just knew what the other was thinking.

The two got married when he came back from Vietnam. They knew each other in high school and met again, when she worked at the downtown Woolworth's market just off of Central and Monroe. He came in for a pack of Beeman's gum. He had been chewing Beeman's before he was deployed for his first "world tour" he always called it. He did two. The second one almost took him when he wound up on the wrong side of the lines with his spotter, a long gun, a sidearm, and miles of future nightmares in front of him. He was in that bad dream for two days, clawing his way back. By the time he was found, the wad of gum in his mouth he had been chewing since he was separated from the rest of the extraction team two days before, finally began to fall apart as he fell into the rescue boat. The gum had helped keep his mind off the hunger. It was also a sign. It quit being gum, only after he didn't need it to be gum anymore. He still chewed Beeman's, and she always carried a pack in her luggage case.

Back when they first met, she had just quit her job as a flight systems tester with McDonnell Douglas in Mesa. She was a student at Arizona State then, and worked at the Woolworth's part time. So, when he came into the store, saw his old high school friend, and asked for a pack of gum by name, and the beautiful, raven-haired girl told him it was her favorite gum too, well, the rest was simple math.

They walked down the sidewalk, looking at nothing and seeing everything. As they crossed from one sidewalk to the other, the man would help his wife up over the curb from the gutter pan, the curb being just a bit too high for her to reach without becoming unbalanced. They had some cards and a present to buy. It was their grandchild's graduation from high school.

Now, in the twilight years of their lives, as the young people passed them on the sidewalk, listening to their music or communicating with their friends, the couple knew those around them were oblivious to them and others like them. They were invisible to the younger people in the crowd, filled with their own issues of their own worlds. The old couple could see they sometimes made the younger irritated, as they had to change their own course on the wide sidewalk to navigate around their slower pace.

The white-haired couple continued down the walkway and found an outside table on the patio of the bar which specialized in their favorite food. He pulled out her chair and helped her sit down, then went over and stood in line to get her very favorite: orange chicken and white rice. He ordered the same, without the rice. It was the same order they'd had for decades. There they sat and ate, watching the world move around them. There were others like them, hundreds even in the small mall, as the two sat and ate and watched, occasionally commenting and pointing out inane things. They were happy, just the two of them.

Sometimes he would think about those days, years before, and the images and tastes would return. He never knew when they would appear in his mind, but it was much less now, he was so much older. He had other things, happier things, filling his mind now. New pictures in his mind he could examine and, in some cases, cling to like a raft, but those darker images and senses would appear at random times, like now, when he walked with his bride. He could see and smell and taste those pictures in his mind from so long ago.

Over the years, he just learned to deal with the memories, dreams, and nightmares—in his own way. His wife helped. But sometimes, one memory in particular still crept in to his dreams and surprised even him. The movie reel of images in his mind always started in the same place.

There were two of them in the room. Both men appeared dead, lying on the floor. If it wasn't for their breathing, their bodies rising and falling with each labored breath, they would have been just two more bodies, laying in the vile filth. One was older and getting more frail by the day. The other was younger and broken. It wasn't cold there, in that room, in the dream, but the bodies sometimes shivered uncontrollably.

The cockroach came from the far corner and crawled across the concrete floor to the older man's face, lying flat on the concrete. It approached cautiously, its antennae moving in hopes of picking up any sudden movement. It crawled to within an inch of the older man. If it wanted, it could have touched his matted whiskers. It was there the creature was drawn. It was the odor of those hairs, whiskers drew the roach to it. It was willing to risk its life to get whatever was caught and dried on the face of the man's upper lip.

The old man blinked twice to awaken and shake off the images as he sat with his wife at the mall, the cool breeze in the shade comforting him. He took a long look down the sidewalk. He could see the store his wife wanted to go to. He closed his eyes for a moment as he ate, then opened them again. The images from his memory were gone and he was back, back with his wife, safe.