

## The Beginning

*Justin A. Kraft*

The smell of mothballs and laundry detergent hung in the air, as Elaine entered the room. "Mr. Halverson? Are you awake?"

No answer.

She had been Albert Halverson's nurse for nearly six years now and had grown fond of the old man and his stories. He told her tales of his travels to faraway lands. Every week it was a new story. She had begun to look forward to his stories, being able to sit back and revel in the details of what this man had done with his ninety-two years on this planet.

Last week, it was the story of hiking in the Galapagos Islands and rescuing one of the giant tortoises that had fallen into a hole on the island. The week before, it was about when he was living on a merchant ship in the 50's and had docked in Taiwan before anybody even knew that it existed.

"Mr. Halverson? It's Elaine. Where are you?" She searched the dusty house. "I wish you'd let me clean in here. It's not good to be living in all this dust!"

Elaine entered the bedroom, expecting to find him still asleep or perhaps lying on his side, staring out the window at the clouds as they drifted lazily by outside his window.

"There you are. Mr. Halverson, how are you today?"

"I told you to call me Albert. 'Mr. Halverson' sounds old."

"Sorry, Mr. Halverson."

"That's okay. You have your habits. How was your weekend? Did you go see your mother in Chicago?"

Albert rolled over in bed to face Elaine. He moved slowly, as his frail frame could not propel him any faster. The curtains had been opened about halfway, allowing a

thin shaft of light to shine through the window, slam into the mirror over the bed, then shoot off again at an angle which led it directly to the crystal doorknob on the old closet door, exploding into rainbows all around the room. The purple, blue, green and red rays were everywhere: the old bird's-eye maple bed frame, the mismatched dark oak dresser, the bright yellow plaster walls, and the wide pine floorboards.

Albert opened his wide, blue eyes and stared up at Elaine, whose attractive forty-eight year old frame was silhouetted against the bare walls. She was wearing jeans and a button-down blouse, her usual attire. Today, the blouse was green. Tomorrow it would be red, and yesterday it would have been purple, had Elaine not been on vacation. For ten years, this routine had gone unchanged.

"Yes, I had a lovely holiday. There's nothing like getting together to make you realize how much you love your family- and how much you love going home afterwards!"

Albert had a faint laugh that could easily be mistaken for a cough. "Tell me how those nieces and nephews are doing. How many are there? Seven?"

"Eight now! My sister just had another one. Little Paul." She adjusted the pillows behind Albert's head and removed last night's used tissues from the bedside table. "They just brought him home. He's all red still, but you can see something in his eyes. He's going to be real smart."

"You tell that sister of yours to make sure she keeps up with him."

"I will, Mr. Halverson."

"Elaine, I know that I'm not going to be around much longer. I can feel my time coming. I don't have any relatives, and all of my friends are now gone. I want to make sure you know what to do when I'm gone." Albert's eyes went dark as thoughts of the

future took hold of him. “Everything is fairly easy, my will is in the file cabinet, filed under “D.”

“Why D?”

“It’s in the file labeled ‘Demise.’ Anyway, the most important thing is in my nightstand. Open it up.”

Elaine reluctantly grasped the iron handle on the cherry nightstand. She pulled lightly and it creaked and rocked on the uneven boards of the floor before yielding its contents to her. She reached in and pulled out a stack of papers. The smell of a comfortable old book filled her nose as the dusty surface of the papers tinged her fingertips with the remnants of time. It was bound with a green ribbon- the kind that should be holding back the hair of a young girl hop scotching her way through the playground, not holding the decrepit remains of nearly a century of thoughts.

“Those are my letters. It’s every thought that I hold dear. I want you to have those. I want you to know who I really was.” With that, he closed his eyes, laid his head back on the pillow, and fell into a deep sleep. As he slept, his heartbeat began to slow down as blood stagnated in his body. His lungs filled with smaller and smaller amounts of air as his diaphragm ceased to draw life into his chest. Elaine looked down at his face and knew that he was gone. A single tear ran down her cheek as she realized that she had lost more than just a ten-year employer, but a friend. She made a few phone calls to the appropriate people, and then sat down on the threadbare couch in the living room. She glanced at the packet of letters, and untied the ribbon, removing the top letter from the stack, and began reading.