

## Goodbye, Old Friend

Art Morgan parked his silver 2003 Hyundai Sonata in a handicap spot, the recognizable handicap tag dangling from the rear view mirror. He turned off the ignition, pocketed the keys in his right suit coat pocket, and reached over to the passenger compartment grabbing the tri-pod walking cane in his right hand. As he opened the driver-side door, a huge sigh escaped from his firm, thin lips. "This is it", he thought to himself, "much as I don't want to face this, I must! I owe it to him! Steve would do the same for me, if our situations were reversed."

With some difficulty Art swiveled in the driver's seat, lifted his left leg out until his foot was firmly on the parking lot macadam, followed by his right leg and foot and the damnable tri-pod cane. With effort he lifted himself out and up to a standing position. He shuffled forward a few steps to clear the path of the door and shoved it closed. "No need to lock it", he said to himself, "who would steal this old bucket of bolts".

Art buttoned one button on his navy blue suit jacket – the only suit he owned – and with the support of the cane he walked gingerly toward the entrance of the Wellington Funeral Home. The funeral home was located just off the intersection of Main and Center Streets, the two major streets that fed all local traffic into the small downtown shopping section of Seaport, a quaint town on the New Jersey shore. The multi-colored leaves on the trees testified that autumn was well under way, although it was rather warm this day. The minimal amount of traffic that Art had encountered on his drive downtown was added evidence that the annual summer visitors had long departed for their various parts.

Art reached the entrance. He had two choices. He could walk around to the right and make his way up the long ramp installed for the handicapped, or he could try to negotiate his way up the front steps leading directly to the entrance door. "Hrumpf!" He said under his breath. "I ain't that damn incapacitated!" Art's pride led him to forego the ramp – he would go up the stairs. He used the railing on the left side and the cane with his right hand to climb the five steps, one at a time, to the front porch and the entrance. Just as he reached for the door handle the door opened and a middle-aged man in a black suit, white shirt and gold, blue and red paisley tie waived him in with a plastic smile and a "Good afternoon, sir". Art nodded to the man and slowly made his way toward the single large parlor. The plaque on the wall at the wide, open door frame read simply, "Steven Alderson" on a plastic insert. The plaque had a permanent cross above the slot where the name was inserted.

It was just a little after 2:00 PM. The afternoon viewing ran from 2:00 PM to 4:00 PM. Art had considered coming to the evening viewing and decided against it; partly because the hours of 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM would mean he would be driving home at dusk, or worse in the dark and his eyesight wasn't what it once was. The glare of on-coming headlights gave him the willies when it affected his ability to recover from the effects. But the main reason for his decision was that he would be attending the morning service at St. Johns, Steve's church, followed by the burial at the cemetery across from the church. Tomorrow's events would be taxing enough without the added stress of driving home at night and getting to bed past his normal hour.

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As he entered the parlor area, Art stopped at the wooden lectern-like stand with the customary guest book. He adjusted his eye glasses and signed his name in the next open row. He took a minute to look over the other names in the book, but recognized only a hand-full of names, mostly some of Steve's slightly younger cousins. He wasn't surprised that there were no more than a dozen names in the book. For one, all of Steve's and Art's close friends had already gone on to meet their maker. Now Steve was gone and Art was the last of the group of buddies that had shared so many years of friendship. And for another, it was typical that those who still work would attend the evening service; that would be those younger acquaintances who knew Steve through Steve's two daughters and sons-in-laws.

Art took one of the little memorial cards that were standing in a tray on the stand – one of those cards that have a bible passage and a much too brief history of the deceased's life on the back side and a picture of Christ with a grossly large heart on the front. "What effrontery", he thought to himself as he slipped it into his shirt pocket, "to think that a person's life of eighty plus years can be summed up on the back of a little card the size of a wallet photo!"

He was brought abruptly out of that thought by Steve's oldest daughter, Susan. "Uncle Art, we're so glad you could come this afternoon", Susan said in a subdued voice, acknowledging his special relationship with her family, even though Art was not a blood uncle. Her smile could not mask the melancholy that was just under the surface of her welcome. Susan put her arm under Art's left arm and guided him unhurriedly toward the front of the parlor where the casket was situated.

As they walked together with measured steps toward the rest of Steve's family in the front row seats, Art recalled having attended Susan's wedding to Charlie Turner. When was that? Oh, I guess it must have been about forty years ago, he realized. Art and his wife, Sally, had attended, and Art was Steve's Best Man. Oops, no, damn it, He was Best Man at Steve's wedding which had to be over sixty years ago. He chastised himself for the cloudiness of his memory. Sally had passed on ten years ago, now. They had had no children and Art had no one close to converse with ever since Steve took ill last year and started on that downhill slide toward his death several days ago. With no one to reminisce with, Art had noticed that his ability to recall the timing of events of the past was slipping. He had started a diary to help him sort things out, but at times it was frustrating.

Art shook off those thoughts and felt he needed to say something to Susan. "This is a sad day, Susan." Then he added in an attempt to lighten the mood, "But you still look as pretty as you did on your wedding day".

She knew that it was a bit of a white lie, but still it felt good to receive a compliment, especially from this dear old friend of her father. "Well, thank you Mr. Morgan. I really appreciate it, coming from Daddy's long-time friend."

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When they reached the front row of seats, the rest of Steve's family recognized Art, standing up and moving to welcome him. First to come to him was Tammy, Steve's younger daughter, and she, too addressed him by the familiar "Uncle". She had gained weight over the years, but still had a lovely face, the features she inherited from Steve's wife, Miriam, who had died a few years after Art's wife. Tammy gave Art a big hug and about all he could say was, "I'm so sorry for your loss; my condolences to the family". He looked at Susan as he said that, so that she would know he included her in his statement.

Next to come forward was Barney, Tammy's husband. Art always felt that Barney was an ok sort of chap. Barney waited for Tammy to release her hug and then he shook Art's hand and placed his left hand on Art's right arm above the elbow, in part to assure that Art was steadied, because the old fellow had foregone the support of his cane to shake hands. Barney was a bit surprised by how strong a grip old Art still had.

The next to come up to Art was Charlie. Charlie approached with that bit of swagger with which he always carried himself, as if he were God's gift to the world. Art did not particularly like Charlie Turner. Perhaps it had rubbed off on him over the years from some of the things that Steve had confided to him; Steve had told him of some of the ways that Charlie had mistreated Susan. Mistreated? Maybe that was a bit strong; more like the way Charlie always talked down to and criticized Susan. Art figured that was Charlie's way of making himself feel more important than he was. But Art was not here to give a damn about Charlie Turner! He was here to say the start of a goodbye to his oldest and dearest buddy. Tomorrow would be the final goodbye, but their friendship deserved more than a perfunctory "adios, amigo".

So he shook hands with Charlie and then turned to smile and wave to Steve's grandchildren, who all waved back and gave him a sad but warm smile. Almost all of them had grown up to become young adults, with the exception of little Amy, who was Tammy's youngest and just entering high school. All together Steve had been blessed with five grandkids, three from Susan and two from Tammy. Art knew a lot about the oldest four, having been a frequent guest at their family functions and what with Art being an honorary uncle. Both Steve and Art were only children – no brothers or sisters. Maybe that was why they had become so close, as close as real brothers, and why Steve's family adopted Art as their only "uncle" on their father's side of the family.

But now it was time to approach the coffin. Susan caught the hint as Art turned and took a deep breath, so she once again hooked her arm under his left arm and shuffled with him to the coffin. Trembling, Art supported himself on the cane and the side handrail of the kneeler and slowly lowered himself to where he was kneeling. He looked down at his old friend and a deep sigh escaped from down deep in the pit of his stomach. He reached out his hand to touch the sleeve of the navy blue suit jacket in which Steve's body had been laid out.

Then Art bowed his head, closed his eyes and whispered a prayer, "Dear God, Sweet Jesus, please look after Steve. He was a good man, not perfect; none of us are, but

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a good man, nonetheless. Take him to one of those rooms you promised you would reserve for all of those who are not condemned to hell. Bring him through those pearly gates and reunite him with his beloved Miriam. I won't ask you for myself – that is to be reunited with my Sally – you know that I pray for that every day.” After a pause to consider if he should add something, Art continued, “Oh and God please look after Steve's family – help them through their grieving and keep them safe from harm. I wish there was something more I could do for them, but I know that it won't be long before you'll be calling me home, too. So watch over them for Steve, Miriam, Sally and me.”

Then Art opened his eyes to look on Steve again. Instantly images started to flood into his mind – memories of days gone by – times that he, Steve, and their other close buddy, Joe Palermo shared. Joe had been the first of them to die, nearly 10 years ago in a car accident. His mind flew back to episodes that began when they first teamed up in high school playing football, baseball and basketball. Those were their “glory days”, when the three of them felt like the world was their oyster – those feelings of joy with the world with so much promise ahead of them.

In the next instant, Art saw in his mind's eye the night of the senior prom. Steve and Miriam had been dating since the junior year at Seaport High. Joe's prom date was that girl, Judy Columbo from Seaport High but that never lasted beyond a year and Joe ultimately wound up marrying Jill Harvey from the neighboring town of Newbridge. For Art it was his first real date with Sally. He could still visualize the group picture that Steve's mom had taken at their house – the three couples, the guys grinning handsomely in tuxedos and the gals all dolled up in prom gowns with their hair done up, all three of them as pretty as any Hollywood starlets.

The next random image that popped into his conscious was Steve's wedding to Miriam, followed by Art's wedding to Sally and Joe's wedding to Jill. For some reason Art remembered that he had had too much to drink at Joe's wedding and Sally had to drive home. Sally wasn't much for drinking, but she never made a fuss, and never reminded him of it except in a teasing way.

Then another image flashed into view. Steve, Joe, and Art celebrating after the three of them graduated college. Their wives, Miriam, Sally and Jill, had gotten together and arranged a surprise party to commemorate the occasion. The parents and families from all six of them were in attendance. Art smiled as he remembered that Susan, at two years old, was just beginning to be able to dash around the house. All in all another happy memory!

The memories started to flash by faster and faster, much as the years had seemed to accelerate as the three friends had become middle-aged and then seemingly overnight become seniors and retired. But through it all and through all of the changes in the world around them, that friendship, that rare bond between them always seemed to be the only constant in their lives. Sorrows and tragedies interrupted the good times only occasionally. After Joe died, Jill moved down to Florida to live with their daughter, Wendy and her family.

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Then Joe died and Art recalled talking with Steve on the porch outside of this very same funeral home about the inevitability that each of them would some day be laid out in a coffin just like Joe that night. It was then that they made a pact that whichever of them survived the other he would make sure that their wives were looked after. As it turned out both their wives died before them, Miriam from cervical cancer and Sally from a heart attack.

Continuing to look down at Steve's inert, lifeless body in the coffin, the next memory that flashed in his mind occurred just a week ago and it made Art feel gloomy and miserable. Steve had been diagnosed four months before with pancreatic cancer and the prognosis was not good – the doctors had given Steve six months at best. Susan and Tammy had been at Steve's bedside constantly over the past week as it became obvious that the end was not far off, and they had just taken a break to go for coffee, leaving Art alone with Steve. Steve had been in and out of consciousness and was under mild morphine sedation – he refused to be totally drugged up and was toughing out the pain.

Art could clearly picture himself talking with Steve that night in the hospital, during a few moments when Steve aroused from painful sleep and could see Art with some clarity and talk over the pain. Steve looked over at Art, smiled with some effort and said in a voice barely above a whisper, "I'm wo-worried about you my friend."

Art shook his head in amazement and said loud enough for Steve to hear, "You, *you're* worried about *me*?" Then to try and make light of the situation, he added "You're the one in the hospital, and as you can see *I'm* the one visiting *you*. So you needn't worry about me. You just need to beat this thing so we can go out and celebrate with a couple pints of Millers Lite." Art knew that Steve knew that they would never again share a beer, but he was trying in his own way not to appear to have given up hope, even though it was beyond the possibility of a miracle.

Steve tried to laugh, but small bubbles came out of his mouth as a cough started to echo up from his chest. After the cough subsided, Steve took a shallow breath, smiled and said in a weak voice, "Artie" – that was Steve's familiar way of addressing his friend – "you and I both know that since Sally is gone and now that I'm going, you are going to be all alone." Art tried to interrupt, but Steve weakly raised up his hand with the I-V inserted to stop Art from objecting. Steve continued, what seemed a bit more forcefully, "Artie, I've talked with Susan and Tammy and asked them to look after you. I know how stubbornly proud you are, but when you are ready, they will open their homes to you. I didn't even need to ask them to promise me – they both agreed instantly. After all you have always been their favorite 'Uncle' Art."

Art struggled for something to say in response, but all he could muster was, "OK, my buddy, I'll think about it, but you know I don't want to be a burden on anyone, especially your family – they've already given me more than I could ever repay."

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Steve had pretty much expended himself, yet he had enough strength left to say, “You will never be a burden to my family, as you never were to me, my buddy. Now get out of here and drive safe, I’m feeling very tired. But before you go, promise me!”

“Alright, Steve, I promise you that when the time comes, I’ll do what you ask. Now get some rest”.

Then remembering it like it was just now happening, Art saw himself get up out of the bedside chair with the help of his cane and saw that Steve had already drifted off to a fitful sleep...

...Suddenly Art felt arms surrounding his shoulders – it was Susan and Tammy. It was then that he realized that he had been shaking with sobs and tears were streaming down his cheeks, after he had said goodbye to the remains in that coffin of his best friend in the world. Susan and Tammy helped Art get up from the kneeler and guided him to a seat in the front row. One of the grandkids handed Art some tissues and he remained there in the chair until it was time to leave the funeral parlor.

Art drove home alone deep in thought, wondering how he would be able to bear up under the church service tomorrow. But more than that how would he handle watching that coffin being lowered into ground, knowing that he would be saying a final goodbye to the dearest friend with whom he had shared most of his life. He whispered the words that had been haunting him since that night at the hospital, the night that Steve made him promise to accept moving in with either of Steve’s daughters – the night that Steve died – “Dear God, why didn’t you take me first.”