Angel, My Love

 Howard Hamilton straightened his solitary placemat one more time and waited for his daughter, Sara, to leave. She was chattering away in the kitchen, and, as always, Howard wasn’t listening. He had stopped trying to follow her motherly lectures twenty years ago, about the time she married. To his knowledge, his lack of participation in her conversations had about the same effect as one can of aerosol spray on the ozone layer.

 Howard smiled and nodded, acting like he understood as Sara brought his dinner to the table by the window. He remembered liking her when she was a child, but his only offspring had never matured past a soap opera intellect. She was like the sack of crackers in restaurants: noisy, bothersome, with not much inside the packaging. He attributed this trait mostly to her mother.

 Howard moved the bud vase close to the window and checked his pocket watch. “Ten more minutes until dinner,” he thought happily, looking at his sandwich with disinterest.

 Sara picked up her coat and wiggled ungracefully into it. “You’d be warmer in the kitchen, but I will not waste my time arguing about it.” She wound her scarf around her neck until the wool was nose deep. Now her voice sounded like a bad connection on a long-distance call. “I wish you would come over for dinner. It’s only a few blocks. We’d love to have you, and the girls at the card games say it isn’t right for you to just stay home every night eating alone.” She stumbled over a stack of mystery books as she started for the door.

 Howard nodded as he patiently rearranged the books. He had never met ‘the girls,’ but he had heard of them as a collective voice for years. He knew ‘the girls’ thought he would damage his eyes reading so much. ‘The girls’ were also well known for their medical advice, which they never seemed to tire of relaying through Sara. He also was aware that ‘the girls’ thought him far too old to be living alone.

 After forty years as an accountant working with numbers, Howard had discovered he loved reading. No matter how much Sara complained, he had no intention of giving up a single book. He had spent ten summers searching used bookstores for these classics, and he planned to spend the rest of his life enjoying them. “And eating evening meals by the window,” he whispered to himself. “Five more minutes.”

 Sara picked up his bag of laundry. “I’ll be back in a few days. If you need anything, tell Mr. Lowman.” Howard shook his head, Lowman was the building owner and only visible on days the rent was due. Sara seemed to think he was a friend simply because he was the only other person, besides herself, that ever came to the door.

 Howard followed his daughter to the entryway. He knew she was anxious to get back home to her boring husband, fat canasta buddies, and ever-playing T.V. She waved and vanished, still rattling instructions as if he were a latchkey child.

 Howard checked his reflection in the hall mirror. He smoothed his silver hair with a wrinkled hand and straightened his twenty-year-old tie. Then, as the clock chimed six, he hurried to his little table by the window and pulled open the drapes.

 As they had for ten years, the blinds from the apartment across the street opened. A stately, white-haired lady smiled as she sat down at her table, also set for dinner. Her dress was ivory with a lace collar and cuffs. She seemed to float in a cloud of softness. Howard smiled, for he thought this was one of her most beautiful dresses.

 Howard filled his wine glass with grape juice and lifted it toward her in a silent salute. She smiled and tilted her heard slightly, in what Howard considered a most becoming gesture. She lifted her china tea cup to him with delicate, graceful hands.

 As the sun set over the New York City skyline, they dined together, six floors up but in different buildings. Howard felt debonair as he flirted throughout dinner with his lady. He knew he was too far away to see any wrinkles in her porcelain face, and she would never notice his worn pants or spotted tie. It had been ten years since they had accidentally begun their unspoken love affair. At a point when he thought his life was over, he noticed her across the way, and there was suddenly a reason to wake each day.

 At first, he watched her building door, hoping to meet her. But she never came out the front. Finally, he had settled for their evenings and his dreams.

 Howard lifted the bud vase with a single lily bloom inside, and his lady nodded her head, knowing the frill was for her. She mouthed her ‘thank you,’ and her lips reminded Howard of the first girl he had kissed in the third grade. She had been his first love and had also always dressed in ivory lace. His lady moved her hand across the table to show him the mock place setting she always put out for him. This simple act told Howard their dinners were as important to her as they were to him.

 Over the years, they had developed a kind of sign language that carried them through dinner each night. They shared their keepsakes, and Howard loved watching her proudly show off her handiwork. He knew nothing of such things as knitting and sewing. His wife would have thought the tasks a wasted effort. Yet, he silently applauded each of his lady’s works just to see her beam with pleasure. He’d smile all the next day thinking of how lovely she looked beneath his praise.

 Even though he coaxed her relentlessly, she would never tell him her name. At first he was disappointed, but he finally reasoned that she was a proper lady. Maybe she told no one of the secret man who dined with her. He walked a little taller, thinking himself as her mystery man. After being married to a chatty wife and always working in noisy offices, Howard found their silent meals refreshing.

 Her name didn’t really matter to him, for he knew he’d call her only one word, even if he had been formally introduced: Angel. Angel would always be the endearment he thought of when he saw her soft, gentle fragility each night.

 Angel had been responsible for his interest in reading. Soon after he met her, Howard decided to buy a book on sign language. He discovered an old bookstore only a few blocks away. While he had been rummaging for a book on signing, a few others drew his attention. From those first books grew a library of happiness.

As he finished each book, he would hold it up to Angel and see her reaction. She loved Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, just as he did. He would have sworn he saw her blush when he showed her the cover of *The Grapes of Wrath*. She shook her finger at him in loving rebuff. Occasionally, she’d show him a book, and Howard would usually spend the next day looking for it. He fantasized himself as a pirate on a quest for the lost treasure or a detective searching for the clue. When he found the book, he always read it slowly, knowing that she too had read each page, each sentence.

 On warm days, Howard would walk in the park. He’d think of little stories over the seventy years of his life that had made him laugh. He’d smile as he sat alone on the public park bench and pictured himself telling her each little anecdote. Sometimes he’d sign her a simple story of his childhood, and she would bubble with laughter. On warm nights with his window open, Howard would swear he heard the music of her laughter, even above the city noise. He knew, without any doubt, she was the only pure joy he had ever known.

 He carefully dressed each evening as if for a banquet, even though his clothes were dated, and he usually splurged on a few fresh flowers for his little table. The rest of his apartment might be a shamble, but he always set the table with great care. If he put the vase close to the window, it looked as if it were in the center of their table. Angel always shone even more radiant with flowers beside her. She was like fine bone chine, ageless and angelic.

 New York suffered a terrible blizzard a few months after Howard and Angel’s tenth anniversary dinner. For three days, Howard could barely see the building across the street. Each day he grew more despondent. Sara tried everything to get him to eat. As the days passed, she became a constant monologue of concern and threats. “Dad, you’re too old to lose weight like this. If you don’t eat something, I’ll have to take you to a hospital.”

 Howard nodded weakly. He knew he could not leave Angel. She was the one person in all his life who he felt honestly understood him. The only happiness he had ever found was because of her. So, while Sara warmed canned soup, he forced himself to move over to the window once more. He knew he had not shaved for days, but he must look for Angel. She would forgive him for being unkept this once.

 He moved close to the pane, searching through the blizzard for her light. Just as he was about to lose strength, her blinds opened, and she stood across from him, blurred by the snow. He smiled and pressed his hand to the glass. She did the same timidly, as if they were touching. With her other hand, she motioned him to come. Suddenly, his heart swelled with love and joy.

 Howard glanced at his reflection in the window. He found he looked younger tonight and very much like the reckless man he’d longed to be all his youth. Now, he saw what he realized Angel must be seeing every night, a strong, loving man. Age had not removed the reckless twinkle in his eyes or the caring spirit he had always longed to show.

 His daughter broke into his thoughts as she came from the kitchen. He glanced up at Angel and saw her gently nod toward Sara. Without words he understood her request.

 “Sara,” Howard turned toward his daughter, not taking his hand from the window. “Thank you for the meal.”

 Sara blushed and ran her hands nervously up and down her apron. “Well, you’re welcome, Dad. I’ve been doing this for years, you know.”

 “True,” Howard winked, and a smile lifted one side of his mouth. “You know, Sara, I’ve always loved you.”

 Sara was noticeably touched at her father’s unusual speech. She awkwardly twisted her hands into the material of her apron and hurried back to the kitchen.

 Howard grinned to himself and looked back across the street toward Angel. Even with the snow, he thought he saw her wipe a tear as she nodded toward him. He was proud of himself and of Angel for inspiring his kindness. He pressed his other aging hand against the pane and watched her shyly do the same.

 Sara returned just as her father collapsed against the table, spilling the vase of dying flowers on the carpet. Even as he slid to the floor, his body was lifeless as winter. Though Sara cried and held him close, her father never returned to her. Death took him as softly as the snow fell on the window. The next week, Mr. Lowman, the building owner, was the only person to come by the apartment as Sara cleaned. He was a robust man who was far more concerned with losing a tenant than Sara’s grief.

 As Sara stacked books up on the wobbly table by the window, he checked out the condition of the apartment. She watched him absently chip paint off the wall with his fingernail as she asked, “Do you own that building across the street too, Mr. Lowman?”

 “Sure, for twelve years now.” He mumbled as he juggled his cigar between his teeth and ran his foot along the pile of the carpet.

 Sara pointed. “Who lives in that apartment directly opposite us? It looks as if they could see right in here.”

Mr. Lowman sauntered over and stared across the street. “Funny you should ask that, Mrs. Winston. That’s the only apartment, in either of these buildings, I’ve never been able to rent. You’d think the Angel of Death lived there the way everyone turns down that place.”

Sara closed the curtains as the truck from the bookstore pulled up outside. She lifted the first box of her father’s books and started downstairs. She smiled suddenly, thinking of his last words of love to her. She decided when she reached home, she would call ‘the girls’ and tell them. He owned nothing she would keep, except perhaps the bud vase and those last few words that would comfort her all her life.