

# A BAD HAND

by Paul Heinz

The path I raked fifteen minutes ago is already covered, the golden maple leaves continuing to fall like confetti in the brisk autumn breeze.

“Why am I doing this again?” I say, in jest.

“Because I can’t.” Joking is no longer a part of Jen’s life. She’s curled up on the lawn chair, her head slanted to one side. Her fatigue has become more noticeable with each passing week, but the way she’s sitting makes her look feebler than she actually is, and it pisses me off.

“That’s not what I meant. I meant why am I bothering to rake the leaves when they’re still coming down?”

“I don’t know. Why get up in the morning when you know it’s going to be nothing but pain and frustration?”

Lou Gehrig may have felt like the luckiest man on the face of the earth, but ALS has provided no such enlightenment for Jen. As if the physical effects aren’t bad enough, her outlook has plummeted, and I wonder if that’ll be the lasting image for me: cranky Jen who focused only on her ailment, and not on the fifty-three years of life that preceded it. A pretty damn good fifty-three years, too.

I help her into the house, prepare dinner and watch her closely as she eats, making sure she’s able to swallow the soup and potatoes. Ever since a serious gagging scare a month ago, I haven’t let her eat so much as a pea without my supervision.

“You want me to carry you up to bed tonight?” I say.

“No, I think I’ll sleep down here again.”

“I’d wish you’d come upstairs. It feels so lonely up there.”

She finishes a bite of potatoes. “I’m afraid that’s something you’re going to have to get used to.”

“Why do you talk like that?”

“Because it’s reality.”

“But why face it before it’s actually here? We could have another year or two together.”

“God, I hope not.”

I know she doesn't mean it the way it sounds, but these days she could say “look at the beautiful sunrise” and it would come off as harsh and jaded. I escape to the basement where I know she can't follow me and putter for a while. Later, when I peek my head into the family room, she's already in her pajamas, reading on the spare bed we set up a few months ago. She's more capable than she sometimes lets on.

“Come here,” she says. “Lie with me for a bit.”

I do, and I place my head upon her shoulder.

“I do love you, you know,” she says.

“I know.”

“We've been dealt a bad hand.”

“Just the last hand. Up 'til now it's been pretty good.”

She strokes my hair and kisses my head. I scoot up and kiss her on the lips.

“You sure you won't reconsider?”

She looks at me resolutely. “I'm sure.”

Very early the next morning, I awake to a noise from outside. From the bedroom window I see Jen, still in her pajamas, shuffling into the garage. A moment later, the garage door closes. I rush downstairs to the back room. The car keys are missing. From the window I can see little wisps of exhaust escaping from between the planks of the garage door.

I tell myself that if the garage remote is in its usual place, I'll press the button to open the door, but it isn't there. Instead, I stand frozen and give in to the inevitable. I weep and wait, and watch the last maple leaves fall from the tree.