

The Pink Umbrella by Shirley Ren

His bad leg was hurting again.

He cursed as he reached for the cane.

It wasn't the pain that he minded. After all, it never truly left him in the past forty-five years ever since the bullet struck him on the battlefield. It always lingered like white noise in the background, in his sleep, in his movements, in his thoughts. What he despised was the alert sent by the growing soreness in his right knee – a rain was approaching.

He peeked out of the window in search of evidence. The late-June sun was unnaturally bright, casting a yellow-tinted veil over the misty blue sky. It would've seemed like a perfect day for a picnic to anyone else, but the few mischievous shades of grey hanging around mindlessly in the distance did not escape the old veteran's eyes.

He sighed as he took out a wrinkled handkerchief and wiped away the sticky sweat clinging on his forehead, suddenly aware of the humidity. Any other day, he couldn't have cared less about the rain, but it wasn't any other day.

It was Monday.

And Mondays and Thursdays meant that he could visit her.

It hit him that it's already been three days since his last visit – three long days, each longer than a year. He had so much to tell her: how he caught a cockroach on Friday, called the kids on Saturday, and almost set the stove on fire

yesterday while making soup for dinner. He chuckled at that last thought and blushed – she'd tease him for sure.

As if to hide his embarrassment, he busied himself by checking the pathetically few possessions in his pocket one last time: a wallet overfilled with loose coins, a tiny bottle of emergency pills, a set of rusted keys, an ancient pocket watch that was always five minutes behind, and a single flower freshly picked this morning from the small pot sitting on the window sill – quite distinguishable among his antique collections.

Jasmine, her favourite flower, the representation of purity, virtue, and innocence. Just like her.

A corner of their "window-sill garden" now occupied by wild grasses was once filled with joyful flowers of all sorts, but it has been left untouched since she left the house. He attributed his laziness to his old bones, but a tinge of guilt made him keep one small flower pot for the jasmines – a sign of liveliness in the otherwise dim-lit and dull small apartment.

He placed the jasmine back in his pocket with all the grace and tenderness that his withered hands had and started walking towards the door. The ache from his right knee reminded him of the rain again.

“Right, an umbrella,” he murmured.

He reached for the pink umbrella standing peacefully by the entryway and brushed off a thin layer of dust from its The Pink Umbrella

fabric. It's been there for a while now, it wasn't as if he left the house often on a rainy day – with an aching leg.

But again, it wasn't any other day.

It was Monday.

And Mondays and Thursdays meant that he could visit her.

He paused for a moment, letting his memory float back to the day they bought the umbrella. The day she bought the umbrella.

It was the third time he had accompanied her to the hospital, the first two being their kids' births. Strangely, in their nearly fifty years of marriage, it was always him who was sick, and her who accompanied him. People said he was tough, surviving through battle after battle, disease after disease, surgery after surgery. But they said that she was tougher, for she hardly ever got sick, not even a cold.

For weeks, he had been noticing an unhealthy yellow settling over her normally rosy cheeks. He insisted that she go see a doctor, but she brushed it off lightly, blaming it on the unforgiving heat of the August sun. A few days later, he found her clutching her right side when she moved, as if there was a sore spot.

Then, on a miserably cloudy day in early September, she jolted awake in her sleep. Judging by the paleness of her face and the beads of sweat on her forehead, he knew that something wasn't right. The Pink Umbrella

He was familiar with the sterile lights, the chemical-filled air, the blanch walls, and the humming of machines in the hospital corridors. But being there for her, somehow made him uneasy. He suddenly understood her anxiety as the one waiting, knowing that the other is merely separated by a slab of concrete steel.

It was nearly noon when the metal barriers opened, and he was relieved to see her emerge from the other side with a weary smile on her face.

“They said it might be gallstones,” she shrugged, and he was puzzled by how she could say it in such a light tone, for he had experienced the same unpleasant illness five years ago.

Nonetheless, he let out a long breath that he had been holding for the past hour. At least it wasn’t anything more serious, and with her strong physique, she ought to recover in less than two weeks after the surgery.

The nervous tension between them started to ease as they left the hospital for lunch, until –

“Thwack!” A cloud exploded over them, followed immediately by vicious raindrops. Cursing, she helped him to get under the roof of a small boutique, and to their amazement, a boutique selling umbrellas.

“Wait here,” she said.

A few minutes later, she appeared with a bright pink umbrella in her hand. “There weren’t many styles to choose from, plus I didn’t want plain black or grey,” she explained. The Pink Umbrella

He didn’t argue.

A lovely pink flower bloomed in front of them, casting a tint of rose over her face. She smiled, and in that split of a second, he thought that he saw the same bright and young girl he met fifty years ago who radiated sunshine wherever she went. Or, perhaps she was still that girl, he thought to himself.

Would she have smiled if she’d foreseen what awaited them that afternoon when they returned to the hospital? He had no way of knowing. But he was glad to have seen her smile with such wholeheartedness, like a gentle breeze caressing the earliest sprouts in spring.

For he never saw the same smile again.

He fished the keys from his pocket and as he was about to lock the door, a cheerful voice startled him –

“Mornin’, sir.”

He turned around to find the boy in his twenties who moved next door three months ago. Hazelnut eyes, golden hair, wheatish skin... He so wished he was still young. He nodded politely – he still hasn’t bothered to ask that kid for his name – and suddenly noticed someone else behind him, someone he’s never seen before.

A fair girl with lovely brown eyes and long blond hair peeked curiously from behind the boy. He noticed that they The Pink Umbrella

were holding hands. Her cheeks reddened when his eyes met hers.

He beamed at the boy, "Good job, son." Then turned around to fumble with the lock.

The boy scratched the back of his neck with a shy grin on his face, "Great weather today, we just went out for a walk." Then he added as if purposely changing the subject, "Sir, you really won't need an umbrella".

Click. The key finally found its place into the lock hole.

"Well, ya gotta be prepared, son, ya never know with the weather," he shrugged.

"Alright sir, enjoy your walk." The couple disappeared behind the door next to his.

"Lovers," he sighed under his breath, "must feel good to be young."

The first time he saw her was at a friend's house.

She was wearing a silky pastel-blue dress, and a white jasmine flower that shined in her long black hair. And her eyes, oh her eyes, they were velvety brown with dancing swirls of green. They had the warmth of a cup of tea freshly brewed in the fireplace on a snowy winter day, and the glassiness of a rippling lake under a midsummer night's sky.

He could not help but gape at her until his friend elbowed him. Embarrassed, he felt his face turn hot and his The Pink Umbrella

head turn fuzzy. Without taking his eyes off her, he whispered, "Who is that?"

"A distant cousin."

A distant cousin, he repeated silently in his head, suddenly relieved for some strange reason.

The trip downstairs was never easy. He had to clutch onto the rails with his right hand and grip his cane and umbrella in the other. Every movement felt like pushing a rusty door, the kind that always makes a kreen- sound when someone tries to wriggle it open.

He had to stop every couple of steps to gather his breath, thinking how nice it would've been if he could grab onto something, or rather, someone.

She would always hold his left arm whenever they came across stairs, carrying his cane in her other hand and patiently waiting for him to take the next step.

"Slow and steady," she would say, like a mother to a child that was just learning to walk.

Even as wrinkles climbed up the corners of her smiling eyes and specks of silver fell onto her glossy black hair, she never seemed to have become frail.

She was always there to lead him, to guide him, to support him. The Pink Umbrella

“Phew,” he sighed with relief as he finally reached the bottom of the staircase. “Kudos to ya, old thing,” he muttered to himself and chortled.

His kids suggested that he move to a newer apartment with elevators. But he stubbornly insisted on staying. “Ya get attached to things, to people,” he always said, “moving is too much work for yer old man.”

He stepped out of the apartment and gazed up, the sun was still shiny underneath a film of murky clouds, and the air was stiff. In the distance, a cicada let out a complaining screech.

He slowly made his way down the street, stopping by the bakery around the corner.

“A slice of honey cake?” The baker, a plump woman in her fifties, asked before he could even open his mouth. She has been running the bakery for well over ten years, and she made delicious honey cakes – the kind that makes one’s mouth water even from two blocks away.

“Yes please.” Then he added with a sense of solemnity, “Ya know, her favourite.”

She nodded as if she’d expected those exact words from him, then put an extra fat slice of cake in a box. “Going to the hospital again?” She asked mindlessly.

“Well, it’s Monday,” he replied as he laid some loose coins on the counter. “They still only let me in two days a week, somebody’s gotta complain...” He trailed off as he started The Pink Umbrella

to walk away, a pink umbrella and a bag with the cake in his hand.

He imagined her girly giggle when she sees that he has brought her favourite dessert, and he grinned proudly to himself. Suddenly, he felt a warm breeze and looked up. The sun, now a dazzling white circle, was half hidden behind a dense layer of gloomy clouds.

He panted for breath as he arrived at the bus stop, the pain in his right knee starting to become numb. He took out his handkerchief and blew loudly into it.

The bus came to a halt in front of him.

“Good day, sir.” The driver smiled as he lumbered onto the bus, grabbing onto the railing to maintain balance.

“Good day,” he uttered.

It was a good day indeed, in spite of the trivial weather.

Because it was Monday.

And Mondays and Thursdays meant that he could visit her.

After settling down in a seat, he peeked out of the window. Dark clouds now piled on top of each other in the sky, and the vicious summer wind sent leaves and dust twirling everywhere.

“Told ya the weather plays tricks on us,” he murmured as he turned to stroke the pink fabric of the umbrella like it was some treasure. The Pink Umbrella

The bus steered past the park, turned right onto the bridge, then swished through the narrow streets of town centre. A route he was so familiar with that he could find even in his sleep.

He reached into his pocket, the jasmine was still there, now with more creases and less vibrancy. To his side, the honey cake gave off a tantalizing aroma that made the little boy behind him eye the bag with envy. He recited silently in his head the things he was going to tell her: the cockroach, the phone call, the stove almost on fire...

Out of the handful of things that could possibly fluster the worn soul, seeing her was always one of them.

Back in the bakery, the baker sighed as she watched the old man wobble away.

“What’s wrong ma’am?” Her apprentice walked in from the back kitchen, carrying another batch of freshly baked treats.

“You see that old man?” She wiped her hands on her apron and pointed to the figure disappearing into the horizon.

The apprentice nodded – he’s seen that man quite a few times now, always asking for a slice of honey cake.

“Poor guy, his wife passed away four years ago but he ain’t believing it. He’s gone mad, still goes to the hospital ‘to visit her’...” She shook her head in pity. The Pink Umbrella

“Every Monday and Thursday?” The apprentice asked as he laid the tray down.

“Every Monday and Thursday.”

The bus came to a steady stop three blocks away from the tall white building – the building that he loathed with all his heart yet visited in his dream, day and night. With his cane, the umbrella, and the cake in one hand, he carefully stepped out, pausing for a second before tottering down the sidewalk.

Tick. He felt a drop of rain fall onto his head and looked up. The sun was nowhere to be found under a woollen blanket of dappled grey. Around him, warm droplets pitter-pattered onto trees, rooftops, and roads. He fumbled to open his umbrella almost with eagerness. As the pink flower blossomed above him, casting a tint of rose onto the world, he grinned.

Of all the passersby hurrying to find shelter in the sudden torrential rain, no one noticed the staggering old man holding a pink umbrella.