The Rocking Chair
By: Shealyn Ivany

“What if we could live forever?” you said. Your words drifted through the summer breeze.

I looked at you, in all your perfect beauty, and I knew it wasn’t really possible. Anybody would know that. But the way you were cradled in my arms, and the way your porcelain face was turned towards the sky, made me want to grant every wish you ever uttered. “We will,” I said.

We were sixteen and in love. Back in our day, it wasn’t out of the ordinary for two young adults on the brink of their twenties to get hitched. So the week after graduation, we had a candlelit ceremony in your backyard in front of twenty of our closest family and friends. I’ll never forget how you glided down the aisle, tears glistening in your eyes as you gripped your father’s arm. I’d never seen anything so beautiful. With a full heart, I said “I do”, and stepped into a life that I never thought a man like me would deserve.

Married life treated us well. We rarely fought, and when we did, we both felt so guilty that we would apologize at almost the same moment. People told us that with time, our newlywed passion would fade. We laughed, because we knew it never would.

And it never did.

We had six children. We both always wanted a big family, so the sleepless nights, bins full of diapers, and a house usually in a state of chaos were nothing to dwell over. In fact, we revelled in it. This was our life, and we loved every moment of it. We loved piling all the kids into the minivan on our weekly trips to the grocery store. We loved shuffling everyone from soccer practice to piano lessons to part-time jobs. We loved the noise and activity during the day, and the gentle quiet at night.

Three girls and three boys became women and men. I watched you cry with joy at every graduation, every prom, every first date. All of our children went through the milestones of life at their own pace, in their own special way, so that these moments always felt new and different. They never ceased to amaze us.

Every family in town would ask what our secret was. You always said, so matter-of-factly, “Love”. These families would protest, claiming their households were overflowing with love, of course they loved their
children, who in their right mind wouldn’t love their family? “You have to show it,” you would say. That would only perplex them more.

I always wondered how I, a simple mind, got matched up with you, a beautiful one.

With determination, and sometimes difficulty, our children entered adult life. Kenneth is a businessman. Amanda owns a bakery. Jacob teaches computer science. Lindsey just published her first book. Michael is a mechanic and construction worker. And Iris, the last of our babies, just graduated from nursing school.

Now, we have six adults instead of six children. At family gatherings, there are fourteen grandchildren running around, can you believe that? It’s like déjà vu. But these aren’t our mouths to feed, or diapers to change, or chaos to reign in. No, this is theirs, and all we can do is support them and lend a hand when they need us. Your face falls when one of our own says that they can handle their children just fine, and if they need help, they’ll let you know. You have to put your maternal instincts on the back burner, and that pains you. All I can do is hold your hand, and make you sit in your rocking chair to watch over them.

These rocking chairs, parked on the back porch so we can watch the sunset, were a wedding present from your late Aunt Mary. She was such a sweetheart, and told us to cherish every moment of our lives, whether we’re young and running around, or old and arthritic, forced to the confines of these rocking chairs. We promised to take good care of them. Her smile reached her eyes as she said, “I’m sure they’ll take good care of you.”

The rocking chairs were built and carved by a dear friend of Aunt Mary’s. The smooth wood is stained a dark mahogany. Matching pictures of willow trees are carved into the head of each chair. Aunt Mary told us the trees represent life, longevity, and love.

We lived in five different houses in our first fifteen years of marriage before settling on this one, a bungalow big enough but quaint enough to house growing children and aging parents. The rocking chairs have been through every house, but it is here that you said you loved them best. The wood of the chairs almost exactly resembles the wood of this deck, and you nearly cried with joy when you noticed it on our moving day. “This is it, John,” you said, stroking the railing and gazing out over the lake. “We’re home.”
You nursed all of our children in these rocking chairs. You rocked back and forth when they sat at your feet to listen to their bedtime stories. You would come to these chairs for comfort, and for a quiet place to write in your journal. Almost every night, you and I would sit here, holding hands and telling each other about our day.

Our children spent most of their lives in this house, as well as our grandchildren. This is where we celebrated countless birthdays and anniversaries, hosted several parties and sleepovers. This is where we grew old as we watched our children leave. Kenneth, Amanda, and Lindsey even insisted on getting married in the backyard. That’s how much love is etched into these walls. It’s hard to leave, because you always want to stay.

We’ve been married for sixty years now, and have been in love for sixty-three. The significance of these numbers never ceases to astound me. It’s been a lifetime, and I’m forever grateful that I spent it with you. I remind you this every day, and when you blush, I can imagine that we’re fifteen again, going on our first date.

Time has been gentler on our hearts than our bodies. Now, I can barely walk five steps without my cane, and sometimes have trouble remembering things. We both have clear plastic containers with the days of the week imprinted over each compartment, a rainbow of tablets to swallow with pride. We had always felt so young, even when we weren’t, but now it’s all catching up to us, whether we like it or not.

Our children visit us frequently, because we have trouble accomplishing things on our own. I remember the first time Lindsey had to help you take a shower. After she tucked you in bed, I found her crying on the hallway floor. “I remember when it was the other way around,” she said.

The boys usually help with fixing up around the house. I know I can always call them to fix a leaking pipe or replace a board in the deck. Even so, I dial their number with shaky hands, ashamed that I can’t do any of this myself.

We were all together for little Maya’s fifth birthday when our children pulled us aside to offer to put us in a nursing home. You would hear nothing of it. The idea was shot down without further discussion. I stayed quiet.
That night, when everyone was gone, we sat in our rocking chairs, swaying ever so slightly. “How did it end up like this?” you asked me, your voice thick with tears.

I sighed, wishing there was something I could say to make you feel better. “It’s the passing of time, Annie.”

“Is there no such thing as forever?”

To that, I couldn’t say anything.

Our children really threatened to put us in a nursing home after I had a stroke. Things got worse after you fell down the deck stairs.

“What were you thinking?” Jacob asked you as you lay on your hospital bed. “You haven’t walked down those stairs in years!”

“I know,” you said faintly, too weak to fight back. “That’s why I did it.”

My memory got worse. After I left the stove on and almost burned the house down, one of our children always needed to be with me. You were still in the hospital, because you had a heart attack the day before you were set to be discharged. The house felt so empty without you. I would sit in my rocking chair at night, trying to ignore the empty air around yours. I pretended you were there. I would rest my hand on the arm of your chair, rock back and forth, and tell you about my day.

But now you’re home. Your days are spent mostly in your rocking chair, but that’s okay; I wouldn’t want you to be any place else. Even though we grow weaker every day, our love never fades.

Every time I talk about you with the kids, they seem kind of distracted. I think they must still want to put us in a nursing home. I know you are totally against the idea, and I don’t ever plan to leave your side, so I guess we’ll be staying here together. But I think they might be sick of helping us go to the bathroom. I can’t remember the last time I went alone. Then again, I can’t remember most things these days.

I’m holding your hand, watching the sunset from our rocking chairs one night, when Amanda comes outside. “Do you want your tea, Dad?”

“Yes please,” I say. “Ask your mother, too.” Every night, you always say no, but I like it when they ask you anyways.

I hear Amanda sigh. She leans down close to me. “Dad, Mom doesn’t want any tea.” Her eyes look very tired. “She’s dead.”

I know it’s not true, but I smile and say, “Okay.”
I see a tear streak down Amanda’s face. She reaches up to stroke my hair. “Where are you, Dad?” she says quietly.

I want to tell her I’m right here, but she rushes off before I can say anything.

I turn to look at you. Yes, you’re here too, smiling as the rays of the setting sun illuminate your face.

“We’ll live forever, my dear Annie.” And then I drift off, losing myself in this stupor, to the steady rhythm of our rocking chairs.