

Grade 9 Winner

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Afternoons with Donald

It was a crisp Saturday morning for September in Kingston, Gina thought absentmindedly, when she stepped out of her front door with her cream cheese bagel and messenger style book bag. Like every Saturday morning in the fall through spring, Gina was heading on her roller blades to the local retirement home six blocks away where she volunteered.

Sitting on the bench outside the lobby, she unlaced her trusty roller blades, slid them into her bag and made her way inside. In the mornings, Gina helped the kitchen staff set the tables for lunch. After that, Gina and her friend Parvi, a 25 year old immigrant, would go around and collect laundry from various rooms. But Gina's favourite job was after lunch, when she would go to the third floor, room 309, to visit an elderly man named Donald.

For only being fifteen, Gina was a very patient, kind hearted person who never tired of reading and entertaining this man who seemed to forget pieces of the past and present. Sometimes, although she visited him daily, Gina had to introduce herself again and explain why she was going to be accompanying him. Other times, however, Donald remembered his visitor and asked her about her various Gr.10 courses and occasionally told funny stories about his children. He would show off mail sent to him and offer store bought sugar cookies that varied in shape depending on the season.

Today, Gina had brought the book *Mary Poppins* by P.L Travers. Being a closet Julie Andrews fan, she had read this particular novel several times and was partly through reading it with Donald. For the last couple of weeks, Donald had been very quiet, only mentioning once last week that his youngest daughter Veronica was visiting because it was her birthday. Mostly, he just sat in his recliner and listened intently, but never breathed a word. So, Gina thought this book, with its cheerful storyline, would help Donald out of his strange mood on his daughter's birthday.

Knocking on the door, Gina rocked on her heels until her elderly companion opened the door. With a slight smile, Donald opened the door wide and led Gina into his tidy room; birthday preparations conspicuously absent. Gina thought grimly, it would pain her to see that Donald forgot that his own child was visiting; not even a balloon or a fresh pot of tea could be seen. Plopping on the sofa, Gina thumbed through the book to find the

page she had dog eared. Starting at the part where Jane and Michael and their father visit the bank, Gina read enthusiastically until Donald unexpectedly interrupted her.

"Did I ever tell you how I met wife?" Gina shook her head, not entirely sure why Donald had suddenly become talkative. "I was about fourteen when the World War II started, too young to join the army like my brothers. Lucky I was; I would have died within a week, with not having much more sense than a hen. Two of my three brothers died in that war. One had his plane shot down, and the other well...."

There was a pause, and Gina was still trying to piece together what this had to do with his wife. "...He went missing in action. After that happened, my mum insisted that I and my younger brother John take up jobs at the bank, like my father. She said it was a respectable path to choose. Knowing my mum, I did not have any say in the matter, so I started working when I was sixteen. When I was twenty six, I was already manager, having taken over my father's job once he retired; I was the youngest in the bank's history. That is when I met Edith, the most beautiful women ever. She was a widow; her husband was killed in battle, with two young children. One day she came to the bank and asked for a job. It was unheard of at the time for a woman to be dealing with such serious matters like banking. You know, women were only to be housewives after the war was over, with the men home again, women were pushed out of the work force. So, when she came in the first time, the bloke below me turned her away even though he had no authority. When she came back the second time, I was there to talk to her and I hired her on the spot. Working as a teller, I asked her out on a date, resulting in us getting married soon after. She was the love of my life."

Tears began to swell in Donald's eyes, and Gina offered him a tissue, but it was brushed away. He continued, "It did not bother me that she had two children from her previous marriage, they were sweethearts and I love them like my own, and soon after, she was pregnant again. My baby Veronica was born, on a crisp September day like this one in the Fredericton Hospital. That little baby stole my heart instantly. After Veronica was born, I looked for a transfer to a bank here in Kingston where I had a great aunt living. I heard it was a marvelous place and it far exceeded my expectations. Buying a quaint little gabled house, I soon was able to adapt to my new life with my beautiful wife and three children. I still remember taking my family to Wolfe Island for picnics and walking by the water with ice cream and playing with Cooper, our Springer spaniel, on the banks of Old Fort Henry Guard. Oh, we had wonderful adventures."

Donald drew in a deep breath and muttered something to himself before closing his eyes and leaning back on his brushed cotton recliner. Gina sat on the edge of the couch, still slightly confused and shocked. That entire conversation of his life's narrative was so

unexpected. Mentally summarizing it in her head, she had heard things that Donald probably had never shared before. He now seemed more than just Donald, the elderly man she was assigned to keep company every Saturday. He was a person, who had so many untold stories.

Gina had many questions, but before she was able to address them, there a knock on the door. Opening the door, Gina met a small girl, no older than four, with little red ringlets sprouting from her head, wearing a dainty pink dress and little white dress shoes. "Why hello there, you must be... uh..." Gina was searching for words when she finally realized she must be the toddler in the Christmas cards sent by Donald's daughter. "You are Donald's granddaughter. Is Veronica your mother?" The little girl shyly nodded. "Well come in, your grandpa will be so excited to see you and your mom."

Smiling assuredly, Gina coaxed the girl into the room. Donald opened his eyes and seemed unsure for a moment before he lumbered over to the little girl and knelt down to her level. "Happy birthday Veronica! My little girl is a whole year older!"

The little girl did not seem as perplexed as Gina, for she politely responded with a slight lisp "It's not my birthday Grandpa." Donald's eyes showed absolute confusion. Then a tall, graceful woman with wavy auburn hair entered the room, panting a little "Sorry dad, I couldn't find any parking. I sent Abby up ahead of time".

Suddenly, Gina was able to piece together what she just witnessed. Gina glanced from Abby to Veronica with wet eyes and could not control her emotions. Veronica made her way over to Gina and patted her on the shoulder. "It's okay; don't be upset, I am used to this. Just give me a minute" Veronica whispered, as she discreetly called Abby over. "We will be back soon." Both mother and daughter slipped out of the room unnoticed when Donald and Gina were placing leaf shaped sugar cookies on a tray. Another knock echoed in the room, but this time Donald answered, leaving Gina to put on the kettle. From the small kitchenette all Gina could hear was Donald's bold, merry voice bellowing "Why hello Veronica, Happy Birthday! Oh and you brought little Abigail too, she has grown so much! Come inside, I want to hear about Ottawa."

Gina smiled, realizing that families need to be patient, when dealing with a terrible thing like Alzheimer's. Yes, they could avoid family members, or be hurt or offended when the person can't remember who they are. But there is no blame to be placed. Although it is a confusing, hurtful time, the love shared is no less intense. It is not the person's soul who makes them forget, but the disease. Gina came that afternoon to share a favourite

fictional book and in return she was given the opportunity to share a real story, one that will resonate long after the pages are turned and the cover closed.