A Place for Us By Brandon Hobson

**TONIGHT I’M STANDING** in the bathroom, in my nightgown, scrubbing my false teeth with a toothbrush. I have taken my liquid green medicine from the plastic cup on the sink, along with my two aspirin and Geritol. My husband, L.D., has already gone to bed. We’ve been married forty-three years now, and our marriage is steady, calm, silent. I attend church every Sunday morning, have given my life to God and to the love of my family, but the spice in my marriage has become as dry and flat as this house.

L.D. and I are both retired. I was a dance instructor. L.D. worked maintenance for Pine Creek Golf Course, where for thirty years he mowed fairways and fertilized greens. Now he spends his afternoons either fishing with our grandson, Dylan, or helping me tend the garden in the backyard. I mostly stay in the house all day and watch my soap opera or clean the vegetables L.D. brings in so we can eat them for supper. Our doctor has provided us with a schedule to help us maintain a low-cholesterol diet: no red meat, nothing fried, plenty of vegetables.

In the evenings L.D. usually reads, and I like to watch the *700 Club* on the small black-and-white television set in our bedroom. Then I’ll walk down to the pond and feed the ducks until the sun sets and I can hear the crickets. Around eight-thirty or nine, when L.D. normally goes to bed, I sit in the recliner and read the Bible until my eyes grow heavy, then I’ll remove my reading glasses and get into bed. In the darkness I’ll look over at L.D., dead asleep, snoring. Sometimes I can sit there and feel like I actually enjoy watching him sleep, all curled up in a blanket like a child. And it’s like this every night. It really has become routine. Sometime during the last twenty years or so, our bedtime schedules changed. We go to bed at different times and wake at different times. We sleep in separate beds.

We have a daughter, Charlene, who makes a living waiting tables so she can care for Dylan. Sometimes Dylan will ride his bike out here and play checkers with L.D., and I’ll cook them both a nice meal. These afternoons when Dylan comes by are special, and on occasion he’ll stay the night with us. He’ll fall asleep on the couch, and L.D. will have to carry him to bed. L.D. will tell him the next morning, “Boy, you know, you looked just like a scarecrow when you were asleep. I almost took you out back and pinned you up in my garden to keep the crows away from my corn.” Then L.D. will laugh his hoarse laugh and poke Dylan in the ribs, and Dylan will blush. He’s really a darling.

Dylan’s shyness reminds me of L.D. when he was younger. Dylan resembles L.D.—same eyes, hazel and narrow. Sometimes I like to think of L.D. as a child, running through the fields or playing stickball in the streets with the other boys. When I think of these things I’m reminded of how wonderful it really is to have Dylan around. And I tell him, “Dylan, sweetie, Grandma loves it when you come over,” and he’ll look at me, milk pasted around his mouth, and he’ll blush. I love Dylan’s visits because when he’s here I feel young again.

Our house sits alone out in the country, seven miles north of town, and it is surrounded by beautiful fields and ponds. We’ve lived here since we were married. Our home is small, and we bought it cheap, but L.D. fell in love with the countryside. There’s actually only one road that leads into town. When Charlene was little we used to take her with us for walks along the road and pick blackberries for cobbler I’d make after dinner.

**Tonight I’m standing** in the bathroom, hiding. L.D. could wake up and wonder where I am. He could find me in here and ask why I’m scrubbing my false teeth, or he could smile and kiss me softly on the ear. He could say, “Sweetheart, what are you doing in here?”

“I was waiting for you,” I’d tell him.

Then we could go outside, under the stars, and hide from each other. We could walk around holding hands. Or there could be a burglar outside, at this very moment, someone dressed in black, and it would be hard to see him due to all the darkness out there. We’d hear him, though, fiddling with the door or climbing up on the roof. I’d call the police, and I’d be afraid, but L.D. would comfort me. That’s never happened out here. Living so far out in the country is safe unless the coyotes are out, and usually they’re afraid of humans. But we’d chase them off, we could do that. It wouldn’t be bad at all.

I would tell him this: “Let’s go see the coyotes.”

“We could do it,” he would say. “They’re close enough to the house. Do you hear them? Listen.” And we could stand there silently, listening to their ridiculous howls.

Summer nights we used to climb the ladder from the side of the house up onto the roof and sit for hours, looking out among the far stretches of barren land and breathing in the warm country air. We’d take L.D.’s old radio up there and listen to Frank Sinatra. L.D. was really so romantic back then. It was little things that made me fall in love with him. And he always loved to listen to that old radio. He loved music. On our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, he bought us two tickets to see Tony Bennett. Before the concert, we ate at a little Italian restaurant, where we drank dark wine by candlelight and fed each other with our spoons. After the concert, we came home and made love.

In my purse, I carry a black-and-white photograph of us with Charlene when she was a baby, and each time I look at it I’m taken back to the weekends when L.D. and I would drop Charlene off at my sister’s and then drive into the city and go dancing. Oh, to dance! How I loved those nights, the way L.D. held me in his arms, dipped me, kissed me softly on the cheek or ear. Last year, I wanted to enroll in a ballroom dancing course at the community college, but L.D. refused because of his back. It’s funny how memories like this constantly fill my mind with the things we did when we were younger. We haven’t danced since Charlene was five. Can you believe it?

**Tonight, after I finish** scrubbing my dentures, I close the medicine cabinet, turn off the bathroom light, and feel my way through the darkness into the bedroom, where the lamp between our beds is on, and I find L.D. asleep on his side, his back to me. I crawl into my small bed and pull the blanket to my chest. My feet are cold from the tiled floor in the bathroom. I lie still, looking up at the ceiling, forming imaginary shapes and figures out of the ridges. L.D. coughs in his sleep, and I hear him mumble something. I turn to look at him, but he doesn’t move.

His health has not been good. He coughs frequently and has trouble getting out of bed in the mornings. I worry about his forgetfulness. He can tell you the year Truman was sworn into office, or how many knockouts Joe Lewis had, but he can’t remember where he put his cough medicine or his bedroom slippers. Last week he misplaced the rake. He’d been down in the cellar, going through his garden tools, and he came back into the house and asked me if I knew where it was. I said, “It’s probably in the cellar where you always keep it,” and he shook his head, mumbled something, and walked into the other room. Later I found it around the side of the house, lying next to the ladder and his old radio.

Tonight, as usual, he sleeps. I try to keep my eyes closed. The heater comes on, and I turn over on my side. I listen to the ticking of the clock. Nights like this I end up worrying about things—L.D., Charlene, our health, what would happen to Dylan if we died. The other day he and L.D. went fishing down at the pond, and when they returned they were both so happy. I was doing the dishes when they came in, both of them laughing. I wiped my hands with a dishtowel and tried to remember the last time I’d seen L.D. laugh like that, but I couldn’t. These are the things I think about before I can get to sleep. Now L.D. moves in his bed, but I keep still. I try to rest. After a while my body becomes relaxed, and I am beginning to drift off, when suddenly I feel something touching my arm, and I turn to him. “What is it?” I say. “L.D.?”

“I had a dream.”

“What?”

“A dream,” he says. “There was a coyote. We were trying to chase it.”

“Oh, L.D.,” I say, and return his touch. I take his hand, freckled and cold, and kiss it.

“Honey,” he says, but I place a finger to his lips. He leans forward, his eyes closed, and presses his dry lips against mine. I touch his cheek, lightly, and after a moment I forget who I am, where I live—everything. I am lifted, gone, soaring high over mountains and oceans. I move my lips to the corner of his mouth and kiss it.

“Oh L.D.,” I whisper. I’m breathless. The place for us is not death or old age or anything else, it is right here. L.D. runs a finger along my cheek, over my lips, and I open my eyes and look at him. He is beautiful. I bring his head to my chest and hold him, and suddenly I’m feeling the years ahead of us open up as long and wide as the fields surrounding our house.