

The Room Where We Go in the Summer

June 21, 2007 Gloria Barone Rosanio

A veteran's story

I was sure you would live to be 90.

You didn't smoke or have a chronic disease. You waltzed around the kitchen table, tried Viagra, played cards, and nurtured your African violets. You began a publishing empire called the "Brown Envelopes" filled with jokes, war stories, and Reader's Digest clips. You collected, copied and mailed the Brown Envelopes every month to 50 friends, acquaintances and Army buddies.

You listened to Rush Limbaugh on the radio and barked at the anti-Republican news on TV. I disagreed with your politics; never argued with your patriotism.

You counted your pennies but never skimmed on good shoes, good food and good whiskey, certain these were the formula for a long life.

"The room where we go in the summer."

I see gratitude in your gray eyes when I realize what you mean: the porch. From beneath a plaid flannel blanket in January you remember warmer days. Days spent listening to Glenn Miller cassette tapes and sipping scotch from your command post – the rattan rocker on the porch where you dictated that the squirrels stay away from the birds and the stray cats scare away the squirrels.

I try to fill in the blanks of your memory and keep you safe while you wander the house at night looking for your identity.

Still at home, around the time you forgot how to dial the phone and use the toaster, you disappeared into your room. When you came out you carried your Sixth Field Artillery jacket and told me you wanted to be buried in it.

A giddy resident floats by in a wedding dress, awaiting her groom. Another totes an empty suitcase, circling the halls in search of an exit.

I looked at all the nursing homes near your home and this was reputed to be the best for Alzheimer's patients. The walls hold 1940s movie posters and the televisions play Lawrence Welk. The closets are full of accessories for an octogenarian costume party – sequins, spats and suspenders that help the residents dress to regress. Smiling staff play along with whomever and wherever residents believe they are.

You would like this place, but there are no rooms available, and no time to put your name on a waiting list.

"Boy am I glad to see you . Let's get the hell out of here."

I don't know if you recognize me as your daughter, but my face is familiar in a sea of strangers. It's your first week in the nursing home that was my second choice. You're seated at a table full of women. Even here you are an officer and a gentleman, instructing the ladies how to color in the lines of the coloring books you were given for activity hour.

I push your wheelchair up and down the hall 20 times. When I stop at your new room, you insist you don't belong there. So we keep walking. Your face lights up when a tall man shuffles by. *"He's one of our men,"* you beam.

You remind one resident, Alice, of her husband. Soon you two become inseparable.

When you go to the hospital with pneumonia, I ask the head nurse what we should tell Alice. The nurse advises me not to say anything because Alice is emotionally fragile. We don't mention you to Alice. In a few weeks, Alice is 19 again and never met you.

A study of World War II veterans found that moderate to severe head injury increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. Another study found this risk increased if the head injury resulted in loss of consciousness.

You never talked about being injured. For years you told stories only about your assignment in the Fijis, making it sound like a tropical country club where you drank under the stars until you fell out of your hammock. When I took your Army jacket from your closet, I discovered your Bronze Star and Purple Heart stuffed in crumpled wax paper.

Your generation is being lost to a disease that will raid my generation as well.

For now, though, all I can do is whisper the words a weary soldier deserves to hear at the end of his long march.

"At ease, lieutenant."