

Only a Memory Away

by Jack Swenson

When Uncle Dan got sent to the Alzheimer's ward, the ladies licked their lips. Fresh meat. A handsome fellow, too, they all agreed. And nice; very friendly. And, oh, when he sang and played his ukulele, they came from upstairs and down. He knew all the old songs, all their favorites: "Skip to My Lou," "Tiptoe Through the Tulips," "Love Is Just Around the Corner," and many more. They were enchanted; they were smitten; they wanted his body.

Hoity toity Claudia invited him to tea. Carlotta tried to lure him to her room, promising to show him old photographs of herself when she was Miss Cedar Falls. Unsubtle Josie threw her arms around his neck and wouldn't let go. They had to call the charge nurse to get her loose.

To Dan it was all very bewildering. He liked the attention, but he didn't understand why they were making such a fuss over him. His family didn't understand, either; his wife and daughter were shocked one day when they were visiting to see one of the elderly women headed down the hall carrying Dan's laundry bag. Alice, his wife, recognized it because, as she told her daughter, she had embroidered it herself. She popped to her feet, chased the woman down the hall, and took the bag away from her. When she examined the contents, she found Dan's sox and shorts mixed in with the lady's under things.

Another time when they got there they found Dan sitting on the floor outside his room. They asked what he was doing, and he said he couldn't get in. The door was locked, he said. Alice tried the door, and sure enough, it was locked. They had to get one of the staff members to unlock it. When they got the door open, one of the other men patients was in his bed. Roused, he wandered out into

the hall mumbling to himself. "He don't use it anyway," the man said as he shuffled from the room.

Neither the wife nor the daughter put much stock in the old man's complaint. After all, consider the source. And after the younger woman told her mother the joke about the old lady in the wheelchair advertising "super sex," and the old man replying that he'd take the soup, her mother laughed until she cried.

When Dan died just before Christmas, that put the kibosh on the annual Christmas party. Nobody felt much like partying. Mort sang Christmas carols in his quavering tenor, and Chester kept trying to grab the microphone away from him, but Mort kept it just out of his reach and went right on singing.

Then Dottie started to cry. Claudia, too. Then the dietician wheeled in a cart with the ice cream on it, and everybody cheered up.

