

# **VOYAGE OF LIFE**

**By**

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# 1

Forty-eight years is a long time. And an even longer time to miss the only woman he ever loved.

Sean hadn't noticed a tour group entered the room, but then he heard a woman's voice. The sound of her voice was like the glissando of a harp, but it cut through him and shifted the arrows of time arcing to an age of innocent lost dreams.

He moved to the back of the crowd. Standing before the paintings he listened as the silver-haired, spectacled woman spoke in a voice two steps above a sentimental whisper that drew members of the tour group close to her.

Nearly fifty years had passed. She was an older woman. He was older too. She was still beautiful. Hell, she was more than beautiful. She was just as he'd pictured--sophisticated, slender, and statuesque, still amply curved in the right places. And, those azure eyes. . .

His heart was in his throat. Warmth rose in his chest and spread up through his neck to his face. He thought he'd never see her again, this woman he'd tried so hard to forget. A thousand times he vowed to put her out of his mind. But, it was like trying to forget a first car. All the years of forgetting and all the moments of remembering, too, sometimes triggered a smile and other times a shake of his head.

The tour group moved close together in front of the first painting as a familiar voice from the past described it:

"In 1842 Thomas Cole painted this series of paintings called *The Voyage of Life*. The four paintings depict the four stages of life entitled: *Childhood, Youth, Manhood* and *Old Age*. Drawing on his strong religious faith and frontier travels, his paintings used American wilderness landscapes to express religious drama and moods. Founder of the Hudson River School, he was a leader of an art movement featuring American landscapes to convey messages of optimism about a young nation."

Sean swallowed hard. His mother was dead. He recalled the telephone call.

"I'm sorry to inform you your mother passed away in her sleep."

Her wish was to die in her sleep. The announcement played over and over in his mind, as a phonograph needle trying to break through to the next groove, failing and darting back to try again and again. Mom was dead, a giver of life but now a word never to be spoken in the same way. Just hearing the word mom would forever tighten and moisten his eyes and recall special memories and squeeze out others.

Rose Buchanan was born in a Kansas farm house aided by a woman who traveled by buggy in the middle of the night to deliver nothing short of a minor miracle. Before she had words, just cooing sounds and touches, there was a coarse blanket, a prickly face and the deep smoky voice of her father and velvet cheeks of her mother. Now he was going home to bury her. Home. That word was like the word mom, but each time he thought about home a scrapbook of pictures flipped through his mind, page-turning memories, happy ones, marooned ones and painful ones.

She had lived and died as she wished, but had grown weary as the accumulation of years stripped away her spirit until life offered little but a favorite television show, crocheting and looking forward to visits and phone calls with her only child.

When Sean left town, twenty-one years ago, he invited her to come live with him in Idaho. Traveling back to Des Moines to see her was not a good option. She enjoyed spending

summers in the Northwest until mounting years slowly shrank her life to a three-room apartment on the fourth floor in a building of mostly women who had outlived their men.

Her shoebox apartment was frequented by ambulances, noisy reminders of old age worse than reflections in the mirror. And, other reminders of her age persisted--aches and pains and fatigue, which she accepted with grace until the last year of her life when angina limited her, mobility required the aid of a walker, hearing nearly lost, eye sight fading, and losing the last of her remaining teeth made eating painful and difficult. Pragmatism replaced shrinking optimism as she complained, "I wish the good Lord would take me and be done with it."

Angina was as every day as the storyline of her soap opera television shows. When she first sought medical attention two years earlier, the nurse took her history and was shocked when she told her she hadn't seen a physician in over fifty years.

A lifetime of no healthy diets, no special exercise regimen, just activity--and plenty of it--along with attitude, all seemed to keep old age at bay. Old age hadn't been able to stop her. Until now.

Well, it was going to happen. He just wished he'd made it back in time. Just a few more days and he would have been there to see her, but then only a scant semblance of her, hunched over her crocheting, and her painful struggles to get out of the chair but too proud to complain. She would have loved to see him again; to see this old man, a little boy in her eyes.

Sean had called the funeral home to proceed with the cremation. His mom was a practical woman not having had much in her life, and never in debt, she had already paid for her cremation and burial. "No reason for my old shriveled body to last a day longer than my soul requires," She said. "I don't know why old people don't just die and be done with it. What's the holdup, anyway, when we have a much better place to go!" She always said she'd be with her mom and dad when the day came.

He had no desire to see her in plastic pose in a silk-draped coffin. She wouldn't be there anyway. He could just as easily have walked out to the edge of the forest, sat on a log, and said his goodbyes.

A week before Sean's planned trip to see his mom when she was alive, he received a letter from someone he hadn't heard from in a very long time. Merely seeing her handwriting on the envelope took his breath away, made him tired, stirred dizzying thoughts and images, a flash of pictures, one right after another in the time it took to slide the sharp edge of his Buck Knife through the top of the envelope. He saw her slender face and remembered how she tossed her blonde hair back when she looked up at him with amorous, azure eyes, the color of sky. The memory so vivid, it was as if he could reach out, touch her hand, and pull her into his arms for their first kiss.

As if a fog had moved in and obliterated her image, there were reminders of their painful separation, the heartaches that never healed and all the questions: Why now after all these years? How did she find him? Why was she writing?

*Dear Sean:*

*I'm sure you'll be surprised to get this letter after all these years. I have so often wanted to see you, but never thought it was appropriate. And, you were clear with your feelings. I understand soon you will be coming to Des Moines to visit your mom and I'd very much like to see you. I have something very important tell you. Please call me when you arrive.*

*Maddy*

