

ESSAY

The autumn of their years

BY KAY MACDONALD
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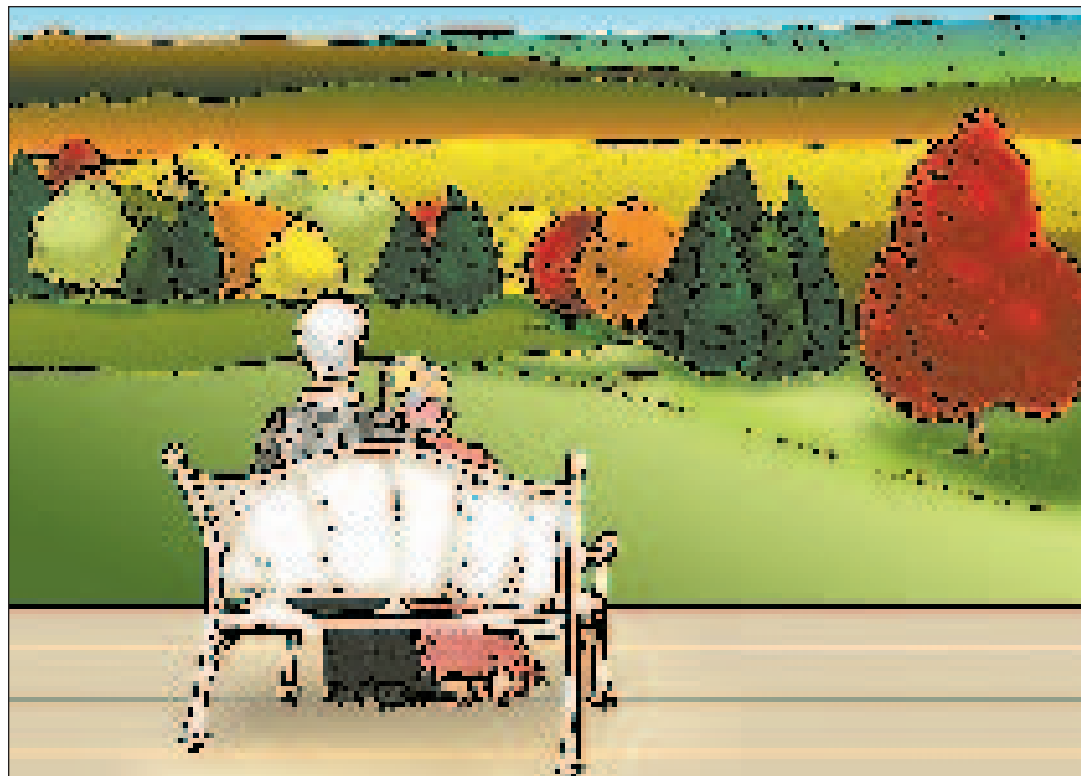
Three years ago, my husband and I started out on a long drive one October day to see the trees in color, heading for Cross Village. We drove our old car, since its gas mileage is so good.

Leaving Harbor Springs, we rode many miles into the rust and gold forest tunnel when the car began an alarming coughing and jerking and finally choked to a stop. We were miles from anywhere, no cell phone, no tools. We began walking back along the winding road. Two driveways led to vacant summer houses but the third led up a little hill to a clearing with a small, neat white house trimmed in green. On the porch sat two old people.

The man waved and welcomed us cheerfully. He was small with snowy white thin hair, dressed in neatly pressed black pants, shined black shoes, a grey plaid shirt and a tie. His wife, smiling from the porch, was pretty with a pink face and silver hair under a flowered silk turban.

We explained our problem and the man, who introduced himself as Paul, took my husband inside to use the telephone. I sat on the porch with Mary, who kept smiling and said twice, "Isn't it pretty here?"

Paul came back bearing a tray with coffee and cups and a plate of cookies. He invited us to sit and enjoy ourselves while we waited for the tow truck. He was very solicitous of Mary and patted her hand as he placed her coffee cup beside her and her eyes followed him lovingly. She kept smiling her sweet



smile and said, "It's so nice to have company, isn't it, Paul? They can look at our pretty colors with us."

I asked how long they had lived here in this remote spot and Mary answered, "A hundred years," to which Paul patted her arm and said, "Actually it's six years now. Mary has Alzheimer's disease and when it began, we lived in the city but it wasn't a safe place for her to be. Too much traffic. Too much noise. Two of our children have cottages here and they're up for the summer and weekends and holidays and they thought their mother would be happier here where there weren't so many things to confuse her. Just beautiful things. Right, Mary?"

She smiled her sweet smile. "Paul likes me to look at pretty things."

We sat there for a few minutes in silence. The enormity of giving something so wonderful to a mother and

wife struck us both. Finally my husband asked, "And what do you do with yourself, Paul?"

"Well, I read. And I cook for Mary and see that she eats right. And I take care of the house and this little yard. Mostly I write to the editors of most of the larger newspapers in America. Sometimes in Europe. About political situations and world peace and what we should do as Christians to get along with other countries."

He grinned and added, "Probably no one listens to me. They might not even print any of the letters. But it's what I do anyway. Keeps me in the mainstream a bit."

I glanced at Mary and wondered if she knew the devotion he was giving to her. I think she did, as she gazed at him constantly — this small, pretty, well-dressed old woman watching her handsome old husband.

Suddenly Paul stood up. "You're missing your color tour," he said. "I'd like to give you one if you don't mind."

He gestured toward the inside of the house. "Mary, you come too."

He led the way, helping Mary through the door, and down a short hall. Mary seemed as mystified as we were and when he opened the door, her face broke into an enormous smile and she held up her hands in delight. My reaction was exactly the same.

It was a large room with big windows along the side and back walls. In the center of a paint-splattered floor, an easel sat beside a small table littered with brushes and tubes of paint. Two walls were covered with dozens and dozens of small paintings, each framed simply in birch branches, and all displaying vivid, amazing color shows.

"Mary was a painter. Just a

hobby painter. Our children took up much of her time but she painted when she could. So when we moved up here we brought her easel and her brushes and I encouraged her art to calm some of her restlessness." He spread his arms and nodded with pride, "And this is what she paints. The colors of her world."

We stood with our mouths open. There were the blues of a bright Michigan summer sky. The soft blurred greys of rainy spring mornings. There were greens of every imaginable shade. Every hue of brown and cream and white and black was there and the brilliant rusts and reds and golds of fall that we had come to see.

I looked at Mary, whose face was wreathed in an admiring smile as if she didn't know who had painted them. And I looked at Paul, whose pride bloomed on his lined face. I felt as if we had been given a tremendous gift.

We sat on Mary and Paul's porch for a short time longer until the tow truck came. I thought of their lives ahead — of when she would not be able to paint any longer. But I realized they were living in the moments they had now.

When we left, we thanked them profusely for their hospitality. Mary smiled gently and Paul brushed off our thanks with thanks of his own to us for stopping by.

We waited in the nearby village for a day and a half for the car repairs and I thought of almost nothing else but the lovely, loving couple. We had to hurry home then, but we had our once-in-a-life time color tour to remember.

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