

ALVIN



After I graduated from university in 1982, I planned to spend the summer learning French in Montreal. As it turned out, life had another plan. I went to a hospital instead. Rare complications to mononucleosis had caused me to become blind and paralyzed. After six long weeks, I had regained my sight and enough mobility to be transferred to a rehabilitation center. That was where I met Alvin.

Looking a decade younger than his 70 years, he was a prospector from a small community in the far north of Canada. He was tall and wiry; calm and gracious. He had caught the flu and, like me, had become paralyzed. The difference between us was that he was on his way to a full recovery. As the days passed, it became clear that I was not. We soon became friends.

Three or four times a week Alvin would come to my room to visit me while I was resting. I'd hear the sound of his shoes first. Moments later he'd appear by the side of my bed holding a tiny bouquet of flowers. One day I got curious and asked him where they came from. "I pick them out of people's gardens when I go for my walk," he told me. "You shouldn't do that!" I scolded. He looked right into my eyes and smiled. "You need them more than they do," he said.

I don't ever remember saying thank you. Depressed and frightened, I wasn't able to show my gratitude, but it was there. Years later, I understood the depth of it when I realized that the first thing I remember when I think of Alvin is the sound of his shoes. He gave me beautiful flowers, but they were only the wrapping for a far greater gift. His actions, born of compassion and empathy, taught me the lessons of unconditional love. It has no expiry date. You give it because it's needed. You expect nothing in return.

Somewhere in this wise man's heart he knew that when I was resting in my room, I was waiting for the sound of his shoes. So he brought me flowers.