

“The Red Line”
by Maxine Sue Feller

Chapter 1

Henry Morgenstern parked his car at the curb in front of his house. Yesterday, he'd felt tired and didn't think it was necessary to shovel the new snow off of his driveway.

He was certain the city sanitation department would clear the streets and he'd be able to park in front of his house...and so they did. On seeing that the street had been cleared, he thought, there's one thing I got right this week.

All week long, the new manager had criticized him for not adjusting to his new ways of doing things at the office. “That darn kid just didn't understand. If it ain't broke, then you don't need to fix it.”

Henry took a last drag on his cigarette, crushed it in the ashtray, and opened the car door. He thought I'm really disappointed that I wasn't promoted to that post as head of the department after Petri passed on.

Oh heck. He's just a kid, but he's the owner's son just out of college who is now my boss. I know that I should've gotten that promotion to office manager when “old man Petri” died.

All these years I was promised that job if Petri left the firm. I feel cheated. Retiring from that job would've given me a good income, but I can't really blame the owner for putting his son into that position. However, I'm not going to tell him how to do his job.

Henry pulled his coat collar up and got out of the car. He hurried along the path to his house. Oops! Wham!

Henry suddenly fell flat on his back after slipping on a patch of ice under the fresh snow.

“Ouch, oh-h, damn it to hell.” He managed to get up and limp the rest of the pathway to his house.

On entering his home, he called out, “Honey, I’m home.” Then he leaned on the back of a tall chair in the entryway.

Ethel, his wife, came out of the kitchen to greet him. Seeing the pained expression on his face, she asked, “What’s wrong, dear?”

“Oh, I fell on a patch of ice.”

“Let me help you to the couch, I’ll get you some ice for where it hurts.”

“No. Get me a heating pad.”

“All right, dear,” she sighed heavily, “but first, just lean on me now, I’ll help you to the couch.”

Why does she wonder why my husband never has confidence in my decisions?

“You’re a good woman, Ethel. You deserve a better man than me. I didn’t get that promotion I was hoping for, the boss gave it to his son.”

“I’m sorry, I know you were counting on that promotion.”

“Ethel, I’m tired of us living in this house. It’s too cold here for me in the winter and too hot in the summer.”

“When you retire, dear, then we can sell the house and move to a climate that you’d like better. Our children no longer need us to be here to babysit our darling grandchildren, and our parents have passed on.”

“Yeah, there’s really no reason for us to stay here any longer. After I retire, we can go to San Diego, that’s where Mike, my tennis buddy lives now.

For months, he’s been begging me to retire and come live in California. Err-r...Ethel, I didn’t get that promotion I was promised all these years. So, there’s no longer any reason for me to stay here, I’m ready to retire. I’ll be damned if I’m expected to help train his son to do the job that should’ve been mine.”

The following day, Henry Morgenstern told his boss that he was retiring. Then Henry called a realtor and made plans to sell his house.

Two months later, they left New York City and went to live in sunny southern California.

Chapter 2

Henry and Ethel stayed at the home of their friends, Michael and Doris Douglas, who were living in the Nine Oaks retirement community of Rancho Bernardo.

They really enjoyed the weather and easily made new friends in the retirement community. Soon after, they bought their own home in the same senior housing development.

Ethel was able to enjoy the freedom to choose whichever activities she wanted to do at the clubhouse. Less and less, she felt the obligation to please anyone but herself. It was a new experience for her.

Ethel and Doris chose to do the craft activities at the Senior Center Clubhouse and really enjoyed them. Mike and Henry played tennis every day.

Free choice was exhilarating to Ethel who had only sought to please her parents, and then her husband and children all her life. So, while Henry played tennis with his buddy or poker with the boys in the clubhouse daily, she chose to return to school to earn her GED. She was pregnant when she married Henry in her senior year of high school and left school.

After two content and happy years of living in San Diego, Henry began to repeat himself constantly. He frequently forgot appointments and didn't remember where he put things.

His senior moments of forgetfulness slowly escalated to senior dementia. A doctor was consulted and Henry was tested for Alzheimer's disease.

Ethel continued to love and care for her husband at home, even when he no longer remembered her name or who she was. She loved him dearly and didn't want to let go of his company.

One day two years later on returning from shopping for breadcrumbs to prepare fish cakes for their dinner, Ethel discovered her husband had wandered off.

Worried, she asked her neighbors and friends to help her search for Henry.

He was found twelve streets away sitting on a curb and crying. The poor fellow had forgotten his street address and didn't know which way to walk.

Well, after that happened, Ethel realized her husband needed to be under lock and key care. It was more than she was able to provide for him. She regretfully decided that she had to let go of him. He needed to live in a locked facility.

Ethel searched for a safe place for her husband in a locked facility home for his safety. She was very lonely without him there with her, and visited him daily.

Henry caught a mild cold after she'd found a place for him. It was a comfortable facility that didn't smell of urine. Henry loved the comfortable brass bed and the bird that sang in the tree outside of his window. She brought photos of the children, but he no longer remembered who they were.

Three months later, he developed pneumonia and was sent to the hospital. After a few days at the hospital, Ethel was called to come to the hospital after midnight and was told to come quickly.

Ethel went and saw he was very ill. She took hold of Henry's hand and told him, "Everything is going to be alright, dear. "

And a few hours later, he passed away at the Rancho Bernardo hospital. Then, the nurse called the doctor.

The doctor covered Henry's face with the sheet and pronounced him deceased.

Later, a nurse gave Ethel the deceased man's envelope which contained his false teeth, watch, and a sweater. After signing all the papers they put in front of her, Ethel left the hospital feeling numb. She saw that the moon and stars were still shining, but everything felt different to her now because she was a widow and alone in the world.

Ethel shivered and put on the sweater and watch before she got into her car to drive back to her house, but she didn't start the car. She just sat behind the steering wheel until a guard tapped on her window and asked if everything was alright.

"It's okay" she lied as the tears streamed down her face. She drove back to her house.

Chapter 3

Ethel still enjoyed the warm weather of San Diego. She planned to continue to live in her house after the death of her husband. They'd been married forty-nine years and nine months.

She attempted to continue her daily activities, but she no longer enjoyed them. Her friends, neighbors, and the lovely weather just didn't feel the same. Ethel was often too tired to get out of bed and didn't leave the house. She had her groceries delivered and rarely answered the phone.

Since becoming a widow, she felt she was being treated differently by her friends, especially by the husbands of her friends. They called to "console her..." and they continued to call her even after she'd said "No." to their offers of sexual comfort many times.

Ethel soon felt this once friendly community was no longer the same to her. However, she didn't know where else she should go, but was aware making compatible new friends at her age would be difficult. Therefore, she decided she would just stay put and pray for guidance.