My Funny Valentine

By Sally Gallimore

When I was a grade school student many years ago, I always brought a handful of cards home to show my parents on Valentine's Day. If I had received a mushy one from a little boy, I usually tried to hide that one behind my back.

After all of my cards and my sister's cards were read, my mother never failed to say, "Your daddy is my valentine." Then she'd retell the story of how he came home from the war on Valentine's Day. "He was so handsome in his uniform," she'd sigh. "That's the day he asked me to marry him. He'll always be my valentine."

I'd hide my giggles behind my largest card, remembering Daddy's Army uniform resting in the trunk in the basement. My dad was older than my friends' dads, and he had served in the First World War. When he'd watch local veterans parading down the street during the Fourth of July parade, he'd ask us, "Do you think I should march next year?"

Later, he'd pull his uniform out of the trunk and put the jacket on. But only the top button would close, leaving his large stomach protruding. He'd march back and forth, singing *Over There* and *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*. Then he'd reach deeper into the trunk and put on his old gas mask, which made him look like a large-eyed, long-nosed monster. We'd scream and laugh as he chased us around the house.

And so, when my mother described Daddy coming home on Valentine's Day, I didn't see the handsome young soldier. I pictured him as my plump, laughing father wearing the suit that didn't fit. I saw my funny valentine.

Many Valentine's Days had passed when my sister announced her plans to marry her sweetheart on Valentine's Day 1953. It turned out to be both a happy and sad occasion; my mother had died three months before the wedding. As maid of honor, I walked down the aisle in front of my sister. In keeping with Valentine's Day, I carried a large, heart-shaped bouquet of pink roses. My sister

My father, John McKernan, in his World War I Army uniform.

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was radiant in white. She came down the aisle on Dad's arm, carrying a large, heart-shaped arrangement of white roses.

We always remember one part of a special day—a moment in time that stays with us through the years, long after other details fade. This day was no different in that regard. At the close of the reception, my father asked us for our bouquets. I knew what he planned to do with the lovely flowers. Later that day, I went with him to the cemetery where we had buried my mother the preceding November. A thin layer of snowflakes blanketed the still-new grave at twilight.

My parents, John and Mary McKernan.

We placed the fragile flower hearts near the headstone. Between them my father placed the boutonniere that he had worn on his lapel, next to his heart. The delicate fragrance of the flowers mingled with the crisp scent of new snow. As we stood there, I stole a look at my father's face. His eyes were far away—straining to touch yesterday. I could hear my mother saying again, "Your daddy is my valentine." And I knew he was remembering coming home as a young soldier—home to his sweetheart on Valentine's Day.

When I traveled to Ohio last summer, I visited my parents' gravesite. The headstone has two hearts joined by a banner that reads, "Blessed Be The Tie That Binds." I have always thought it an appropriate epitaph for them. They will live in my heart forever—my dear mama and her sweet, funny valentine. ❖

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