The Last Birthday

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IT was October and Washington lay waiting for winter. A bitter wind came from the north and leaves were scuttling across the sidewalks, scratching and rattling as they gathered in little heaps and then moved on. The streets were left to their cracks and patches, and were disturbed only occasionally by a passing government vehicle hurrying somewhere.

The general had awakened and members of the hospital staff were wishing him happy birthday. His personal physician came in to check all the dials and instruments that told how the general was doing. Nothing abnormal showed on any of the graphs or machines and the doctor gave the assurance that everything was fine, and left. A tray was slid over to the bed, the general took some breakfast and began his day. Outside some TV men were setting up cameras and sound equipment. They worked quickly, stopping to blow warm air through their fists to keep warm. Dark clouds were piling up in billowy lumps and scudding across the sky.

It had not been expected that the general would live to see this day, not this birthday or even any of the last dozen, but he had simply refused to die although there was no physiological reason for his heart to go on beating. His heart! A perfectly well functioning body but for one bundle of muscle, and now was not really muscle but a strangulation of scar tissue that but for continuous application of the most sophisticated drugs would lie frozen.

The general was up and talking to his wife. They were waiting for the army band that was supposed to come and play today for the birthday. She had brought some hot-house jonquils and placed them on the bed stand. Their exotic smell was doing something nice to cover the ever-present odor of the hospital. Sounds of uniformed men, leather straps, and sharp commands came from below in the courtyard where the band was assembling. Some of the general’s old military colleagues had sent the band over to play. They did it perhaps as much out of the tradition of military people paying honor to military people as they did in re-
membering him and what he had done for the nation. Newsmen dutifully switched on their cameras and went to work, photographing the band first, and then the general's window. The crew was here only on orders and a little curiosity. Interest and excitement were concentrated over at the senate hearings and they'd rather be there than taking some footage that probably wouldn't be used anyway.

The band leader was standing in front with white gloves and a baton. His uniform bulged a little at the stomach and there were a couple medals pinned on his coat. He swung both arms up and the band started into the thumping strain of "Hail to the Chief." Above, the general was wheeled over to the open window so he could look at the band. Pomp, pahh-pihh-pumph, . . . pahhh-pihh-pomph-pihh-paa-puuh-parrr-umph. The frumpish traditional sound of the drums and brass were doing the best they could at being reminiscent. Someone had handed the general his flag, five white stars in a circle on red. He looked like a small boy at a parade with his wife holding him up so he could see and smile and wave the toy flag on a stick. Then slowly his face collapsed into the wrinkled frown of old age. His skin was the bleached white of the hospital, the color that comes only to those who are making a permanent stay.

All that could be seen looking up from below was the expanse of neat brick with the open window and a little bit of the general. The general had once wielded enormous power. Half the world had been at his command and with all his forces—land, sea and air—he had brought a kind of peace, and made himself a hero in doing it. Twenty-five years have passed, nearly two billion people have been born since that time and do not know and can not remember. Now nearly everything is dead. The heart, but not the general.

The band finished with a crescendo, a roll of drums and cymbals. The wind tore at the last sound, breaking it into a sickly bleat, and blew it away. The general waved his flag a last time and was taken back to his bed. The band marched away. The TV men packed up equipment and went somewhere else. The medical instruments were again fastened to the general. Someone closed the window. The hospital waited and bare limbs of trees rattled against each other in the autumn air.