WAITING

 Tom was aware of the aching, unfulfilled longing since childhood.

 It was a vague feeling of unhappiness, a waiting for something momentous to come.

 When he discovered girls in his early teenage years, he realized that his sense of incompleteness was related to his need for love -- sincere, perfect, giving-and-receiving love.

 So he began dating. He went out on dozens of dates, with a variety of eager girls. Tom learned many new pleasures and emotions, but he also learned that his one, special person was yet to be found.

 Then the dreams began.

 He clearly pictured her, his ideal woman. She was exactly what he wanted. Exactly what he needed. She was totally accepting, comforting, loving, selfless. She was beyond beautiful, like someone from another world. She was his and his alone. He would be only for her, and give her everything that was inside his heart and soul forever. They would merge as one, and go deep together into the endless dimensions of pure, true love.

 But where was she? How would he find her?

 Tom went off to college. He continued dating at school, but he was always looking for his special dream woman. After graduation, he began his career. At his job, he dated some of his female coworkers, but the relationships didn't last. Even when traveling for work, either domestically or internationally, Tom was forever looking and looking.

 Sometimes, in a crowd, he thought he might have glimpsed The One. He would then follow the woman discreetly from behind. But when the mystery stranger inevitably turned so he could see her face from a short distance away, he sadly realized that it wasn't her.

 Every love song he heard -- or poem or novel he read, or movie he watched about falling in love -- went straight to his heart. Oh yes, I know! he thought, because he knew the exact feeling that spoke to him.

 Tom was utterly obsessed. The feeling of his unrequited need was overpowering.

 His family and friends kept encouraging him to find a nice, dependable woman and get married, to settle down and start a family. "Don't wait for perfection in a mate," they urged him. "It's just a common fantasy we all have. I'm afraid that your imagined lady doesn't exist." Yet Tom's heart simply wasn't into settling for second or third or fourth best. Instead, he kept waiting and waiting, ever searching.

 Finally, he gave in to social pressures and got married. Outwardly, he and his wife seemed happy. They had a fine house and two bright, attractive children. His career was successful. But Tom pined away in private and in silence, knowing that his wife was not the one he really wanted. After a dozen years, they divorced. His wife was awarded custody of their kids, so as a result, he seldom saw them as time went by.

 The decades slowly passed. He tried marriage two more times, each with the same result. Each union lasted for about ten years, then dissolved. Tom tried his best, and thought that he had learned from his earlier mistakes. But his female relationships still didn't work. He didn't care to have any more children either. It was pointless, he figured, unless it was with The One.

 The dream of his ideal love, however, never faltered. He saw himself growing older every morning, while staring into his bathroom mirror. When? How? he moaned. "She must be out there somewhere, waiting for me, just like I am waiting for her!" he cried aloud one lonely night in his virtually empty house, unable to sleep.

 Tom eventually retired from his career at age sixty-eight. He sold his house and moved to another state with better year-round weather. His health was still O.K., but he was starting to feel the years.

 Still, he kept hope, and kept waiting, and kept hoping against hope that he would find The One. If only for a few years together, it would be worth it! he thought. Or even for one year, or a month, or even just an hour! I have to see her, and hold her, and talk with her, and simply be with her! His longing was actually physically and mentally painful. His emotions were never at rest. He thought of little else. Life's pleasures and friendships seemed hollow and barren. Money, power, status...all were naught but empty promises.

 Yet in his dreams at night -- and in his daytime imaginings, as Tom sat in his favorite balcony chair and looked out at the drifting clouds on the horizon -- she would come. He could smell her fresh skin, caress her glowing face, stroke her hair, taste her inviting lips, hear her soothing voice. He willingly drowned in her ever-accepting eyes, his soul delightfully surrendered, awash in her love...

 Approaching age eighty-three, Tom suffered the typical major health setbacks of his generation. He sensed his days were dwindling. He was tired. Is this all there is at the end? he wondered. What did this life -- my life -- really mean?

 At last, he went outside on a dreary late afternoon in early November and sat on a park bench alone by the small lake at his retirement community. Geese were flying in formation overhead, heading south for the coming winter.

 That was when he saw her. She had appeared suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere.

 She was exactly as he had envisioned her, all of his life -- perhaps age twenty-four with perfect bodily proportions, she walked with grace and sensual allure. This unique woman was exactly what he needed and wanted. For an instant, he forgot that he was, in fact, an ailing old man. He felt young again, brimming with vitality and optimism. His life was finally ready to begin, as he had always hoped! This was it, his one last chance at true happiness.

 "Hello, Tom..." the woman said. "I have been waiting for you." She smiled the purest and most loving smile that Tom had ever seen. It was like a vision out of paradise. He was transformed. His heart was finally at peace, his quest at last complete.

 "Oh, please, please tell me...who are you? What is your name? I have waited for you for so long..." Tom gently inquired. "All of my life, my heart has been for you and only you."

 "I know, my dearest...I am Death, of course. Come, take my hand," she warmly extended it. "All is as it should be, Tom. Have no fear. I am here to help you make your natural transition. We are going away together now. You don't need to worry about anything anymore, Tom. Come, take my hand..."

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 Tom's body was found, slumped over, an hour later by a neighborhood friend who happened to be out taking a walk to view the evening sunset.

 He would never forget the look on Tom's face when he carefully raised it up in his cupped hand.

 It was an expression of inexplicable serenity...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 April 7, 2022