***An interesting little story which has been published in Australia in an anthology called ‘Achievement’. It was a open theme and I was looking for an angle which wasn’t sporting or architectural or entertainment based. Then I was talking with a friend who has become a father late in life and after I assured him many times through my incredulity I could never have the patience for that I knew I had my angle on achievement. It is about life, and second chances for love.***

**Stork bites and Angel’s Kisses.**

Illusion? Dream? Will-o’-the-wisp?

Perhaps, after a long full life, my wits had been plucked from my brain by Dorothy’s tornado and flown, if not to Oz, then to cloud cuckoo land.

Is this Shangri-la? The *ignus fatuous*of a grey haired man with sufficient years of hopes and dreams under his tightening belt to justify being called old, perhaps even ancient and wise.  A devilish concoction of a lifetime of trial and error, failure and success and now finally, this, the crowning achievement.

A pipe dream come true, against all the odds.

To hold such a tiny vulnerable thing, nestled in the rough, pitted plumpness of my cupped sweaty palm. I had been staring, unblinking, not counting the minutes, consumed by the miracle which I held. Marvelling at this vision.

Shall I compare thee to a spring blossom blooming, though in comparison the flower would fare poorly against such loveliness.

Oh, this was no Taj Mahal or Statue of Liberty, no Table Mountain, **Beipangjiang Bridge,** or Grand Canyon. I know, because in all my seventy progressively creaking years on this earth I have visited them all and more besides. Bottled up inside, careful never to allow seepage into the new reality, memories of journeys with my first wife, gradually being overlaid by new memories created with Jane. Always hoping that Jane would experience the same joy as we visited the places Emily and I might have visited had not time run out for dear Emily.

Emily. Always the first but not the last in my heart, her place in my heart reserved.

Achievement. A double-edged sword perhaps. To paraphrase wise Mr Newton for every triumph a failure; for every victory a debacle; for every win a loss; for every fulfilment a disappointment; for every conquest a defeat.

In all of my travels I have found that there is not a country on this earth that does not boast of its achievements through some measure of size. A monument or structure, taller, higher, or grander than the one which came before. I read in a novel sometime that the Emperor Nero’s stepfather said once to the fledgling Emperor that you can always find something to celebrate if you look hard enough. I could happily buy into that philosophy without accepting some inalienable right for achievement to be measured in bigness.  Is it an age thing, that one begins to look not to bigger and better but to look downward to smaller for the truly remarkable? Those early scientist pioneers who looked not to the vastness of space for the truly marvellous but looked inward to the hitherto hidden sub-atomic universe for unseen marvels.

For what could be bigger than life itself?

What could feel more of an achievement than to be a partner in the progeneration of life?

This tiny object outweighed all of those grandiose paeons to human endeavour as the perfect embodiment of a justified sense of achievement.

Achievements, I’ve had a few, but then again too few to boast about. Almost familiar words. That happens a lot now. That is an age thing. No matter. They convey the gist. As a boy I was harshly taught the hubris of celebrating achievement, no matter how small. I quickly understood the sharp smacks around the head which inevitably followed an unguarded punch into the air or a cry of ‘yes’ delivered with a broad grin in the presence of either parent – singly or together. Sin and pride I heard them say each time, a sketchy little mantra repeated in parable at Sunday School, never really making sense to me. Fortunately, they never came to see me play football on a Saturday morning else they might have been compelled to rush onto the muddy greensward and slap me in front of the team for celebrate I did, and vigorously, whenever I scored a goal. Those little achievements I celebrated all the more for the freedom to do so. Was it an achievement to have escaped the stultifying confines of that family home? That is so unworthy a thought in the presence of a truly marvellous achievement.

Ah, the tiny shape moves. A little soft shoe shuffle, perhaps a wiggle and a wriggle, always safe within the soft deep cup of my hand. I flex my fingers a little more to spider around the little shape, held mere inches above a safety net of soft cushions upon the floor.

    Not an achievement for which I could take all credit, even were I so immodest. As an old man, never a grandfather, I have watched others enjoy the pleasure of new life born in their image, an achievement which Emily and I were destined never to share.

 No, this is a moment for Jane and I to share. Such a tiny wrinkled vulnerable thing, nestling in the toughened moonscape of my cupped palm. Those wrinkles and the angel’s kiss on the left cheek will fade, whilst my wrinkle are indelible, forever, set in place like those of the turtle over the years. Once I imagined my wrinkles to signify the end of my potency, the termination of my ability to be a life giver. Jane, my junior by a decent but significant number of years never relinquished hope, though if it was ever given expression it was in her inimitable delicate manner. As fragile as Ming pottery. As strong as steel.

For Jane, the desire to be a mother at two score years was not unthinkable but unusual in our society which seems often to be only a celebration of youth.

For myself, to be a dad, finally at three score years and ten. A roll of the dice I thought to be loaded against us. I dared not believe.

Yet, my pipe dream had come true.

If I had achieved nothing else of value in all my years on earth, previous or remaining, Helen, as our daughter would be named, would be sufficient.

Achievement.

So much sweeter when gained against the odds.