

How We Live Today

Cecil edged into bed, careful to avoid jostling it and bothering Rose. This was the routine, and had been for the past six years. Each night a variation of two. Rose was either asleep or in pain. Arthritis was her prize for surviving cancer; radiation therapy and chemotherapy stripped down her immune system, and arthritis crept in. But Cecil reminded himself as if it were a prayer, she was alive.

He reached out to touch her, slowly, softly, taking great care. If he touched her on the back instead of her arm, she might be jolted by pain and pull away from him. Land with too much enthusiasm on her arm and her sleep could be broken, possibly not to return until just before dawn. But gently, he could feel her warmth without hurting her or disturbing her. And Cecil could be grateful; with her alive, this could not be the worst.

Rose stirred when he touched her tonight. "I'm glad you've come to bed." Her voice was soft, like a little girl's.

"I've bid on four more free-lance jobs and sent out a resume to an office in Fort Worth," Cecil replied as he ran his hand down her shoulder. He forced confidence into his words; the last call he had gotten from a lead on this website was a guy who wanted a logo for his car wash. He came into Cecil's studio off of the garage with a computer-drawn mountain, its peak poking through the clouds. But the straight line drawing looked as if it had been done on an Etch-A-Sketch. Car Wash Man said he wanted something that could go on a business card, website, and the lighted sign over the car wash. At the ad agency, this project would have gone easily over a thousand dollars, but Cecil said he could do the design work for two hundred dollars, and then forty dollars an hour for no more than ten hours to coordinate with the sign company and the web host. The guy

shook his head, and three weeks later the Etch-a-Sketch design started popping up in Google ads whenever Cecil searched “Dallas area graphic design jobs.”

Cecil listened to Rose’s soft breathing as she drifted back to sleep. And his thoughts swirled around what he had to do in the morning for Thanksgiving dinner. He already had placed the turkey in a roaster in the refrigerator and scrubbed potatoes so they could be peeled first thing. What rattled him now was how quickly Rose tired. She had done everything for holiday meals before her arthritis worsened. Now, it ruled her time, and she grew worn out quickly. Making a pumpkin pie and a peach pie was all she could manage before she went to bed.

Cecil thought how their son Jason struggled when he first enrolled in Dallas County Community College. Now he was within a semester of transferring to the biomedical engineering program at the University of Texas-San Antonio, a field Cecil had never heard of until Jason brought home the transfer application. Past doubts about Jason’s future now seemed like an irrational fear.

Cecil’s stepmom, Claire, slept in the guest room. She had married his dad five years after his mom died of a heart attack. After Claire married Dad, she seemed distant when he came home from college. On an Easter weekend he tried to clear the air, but her words stuck with him. “If you can’t pay for your schooling yourself, then you shouldn’t be going.” At the end of that semester in his junior year, instead of returning to Tulsa, he joined a friend on a summer job search in Dallas. That summer he met Rose Cline, a sophomore at Southern Methodist University, and his summer job turned into full-time employment that led him to stay in Dallas.

Cecil never told his dad what Claire had said, but his visits home became rare and short before Jason was born. Claire did not have children before her first husband, an advisor in Vietnam, died in combat before it was a war. So becoming a step-grandmother broke down whatever resistance she had toward Cecil. When he saw how Jason had favored her among his grandparents, then he warmed to her, but never felt close.

Cecil also thought of his father's death the week after last Thanksgiving. And how the previous summer when he and Jason took Dad on a fishing trip to Grand Lake that he had tried to avoid his father's failing health. Although the first day had gone smoothly, the second day of taking a boat out on the lake wore Dad out by ten o'clock that morning and he slept through lunch and the afternoon. Instead of going out on the lake that evening, Dad insisted on going home, saying he felt too weak to return to Tulsa in the morning and go straight to the dialysis center. Two years earlier, he was spry enough to do it that way, but on this trip back to Tulsa, Dad broke down in tears as he said this would be his last fishing trip ever. Now it pained Cecil to have dismissed his father's concerns by saying that heat had gotten him down, and that he'd be fine with a couple days rest at home. A month later his father suffered a mild stroke that put him in the hospital for a week. The stroke required occupational therapy visits for six weeks that were worked in around his three-days-a-week dialysis routine. Thus his life turned into trips in the morning for dialysis or therapy and naps in the afternoon that lasted until dinner, for which he had no appetite, and then to bed.

Now Cecil wished that he had not cut short the trips to his parents when it was just him and Rose because of his ill feelings toward Claire. And he wished that he had let Jason spend more time at holidays with both sets of grandparents when he was in

elementary school and middle school. And while the rift with Claire had lessened, Cecil knew it was not healed. Now he decided he must let her know that he believed her marriage to Dad was what kept his father alive. And with that thought, Cecil drifted off to sleep.

When the alarm rang the next morning at 6:30 a.m., the first to stir was Fritz, a 12-year-old yellow Labrador that slept on a pad on Cecil's side of the bed. Fritz began sleeping there when Rose started her treatment for melanoma spots on her back and shoulders. When she had checked in at the hospital, Fritz stretched out near the front door during the day, and that first night claimed the spot near the bed on Cecil's side. When Cecil could not sleep, he prayed out loud, not so much for a miracle cure, but for comfort, hope and understanding. When Cecil finished, he noticed that Fritz had raised his head from slumber and was watching him closely as if the petitions had been directed to him. As the radio alarm buzzer faded into the voices of *Morning Edition*, Cecil watched Fritz huff to pull himself up, and he thought once more that this could be Fritz's last winter. Perhaps this winter would be mild, a blessing to Rose and the old dog who had become Cecil's morning walking companion.

Cecil slipped out of bed quietly and gently pulled the covers up around Rose. Fritz wagged his tail as Cecil slipped on a robe and house shoes for the walk to the back door to let Fritz out into the yard. Cecil's morning rituals continued with a cup of coffee, decaff because that was easier on Rose. When he heard Claire in the hallway, he pulled down a coffee cup for her. Cecil stirred a maple flavored creamer and sugar into one cup and offered it to Claire.

“Black’s good,” she said, but Cecil persisted and extended the cup. “Try something special for the holiday.”

She looked at the stream of creamer inside the cup and stepped back. “That’s too much. Maybe a teaspoonful.”

Cecil smiled as he turned to take another cup. He wanted to tell her that she would not taste the maple flavoring with just a spoonful. “I’ll set this one aside for Rose,” he said, and measured out a spoonful of the creamer and gave Claire the cup. “I hope you’ll like it.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said as she filled her cup. She stared at it for several moments. “We never had extras like this when I was growing up; we made do, and got used to it.”

The tone in her voice wiped away Cecil’s smile and his throat tightened. “I hope you like it.” He shifted his gaze away from her, for now the memories of her nitpicking over his habits and choices through college were as strong as if they had never left, that a divide existed that would never close within their lifetimes.

She sipped more and shook her head. “I guess that’s okay, but it’s not for me; I’ve got to have it black with a little water if it’s too strong.”

Cecil looked at her arm as she held the cup. As he offered to dump it for a fresh cup, he could not ignore what he saw, a frail arm dotted with age marks and the slightest trace of fading scars. She too could soon be gone, and what would it matter if her tone was snippy or sweet?

“Out on the farm in the Depression we felt lucky to still have our place,” she said, “even if it meant going through the house and gathering up the coins to make the last

dollar to pay the land taxes. We grew our own food in the garden, and we just didn't have money for any extras."

The softness in her tone took the tightness from his mouth, and as she pulled the cup up for another sip, Cecil realized that the strength in her words mattered more than the visible frailty. He was glad that he had not laughed at the spoonful of what amounted to sugar water spoiling her cup of coffee.

"Since Rose has been sick, and we've been pulling money from savings that we thought we'd never touch just to tide us, I never gave much thought to the little luxuries," Cecil said. "Strength isn't always being strong enough to fight back against the storm."

"That's the truth," Claire said, and smiled at Cecil.

He took a deep breath and set his cup on the counter.

"When you and Dad got married, I wasn't sure what he was wanting or needing," Cecil said. "I was away and my sister was just starting her family. We both were wrapped up in our own concerns."

"That's pretty much what your dad would say when he talked about you two and your families," Claire said.

"I should have said this long ago, Claire." Cecil swallowed hard. "You made Dad's life better. Thank you, for all you gave to him and for all you did."

She nodded and looked away, and Cecil stepped aside out of Claire's way to sit at the counter. Rose came in and took the coffee with the creamer that had been waiting for her, and sat next to Claire.

As they sipped, Cecil turned on the oven and pulled the roaster from the refrigerator. Cecil made sure the turkey looked right before going into the oven. And

when he took a dozen eggs from the refrigerator before setting a large saucepan filled with water on the stove, Claire spoke up.

“How about I fix the deviled eggs,” she said. “Jason always likes the way I fix them.”

And Cecil, only moments before wondering how he’d manage to get Thanksgiving dinner put together, nodded. “Anything you want to fix, I’d greatly appreciate, Claire.”

“If you’ll get me the mustard, mayonnaise, and seasonings,” she said.

“You bet, Claire,” he said. “Anything else?”

“I like to put in just enough Tabasco sauce that you can taste it without reaching for a glass of water,” she said as she loaded the eggs into the sauce pan.

“It’s in the door of the refrigerator.” Cecil started to get it out, but Claire interrupted him.

“I won’t need it until I’m mixing the filling. As soon as I get these eggs boiling, I can peel the potatoes, too.”

“OK,” Cecil said as he broke into a grin. “But don’t wear yourself out.”

“There was a time with my first husband, Thanksgiving would be at my folks’ farm, and we’d cook for thirty. And that’d be turkey and ham, mashed potatoes and sweet potatoes, four kinds of pie – the whole works.”

“I bet that was a time,” Cecil said.

Claire poured more coffee, and Rose excused herself for her morning round of medications.

“When Jason gets up,” Claire said, “I’ll ask him to mash the potatoes. Your dad got a kick out of that when Jason came up for a visit over Christmas when he was about twelve or so, before he got to high school. and he asked if he could mash the potatoes.”

And Cecil was comforted that Claire had found comfort through a connection with Jason that he had known little about. And through that connection, Cecil saw that her help with the dinner asserted that she was a part of this family.

By the time Rose returned to the kitchen, Jason had mashed the potatoes and spooned a large dollop of butter on top before Claire covered the serving bowl with tin foil. Cecil quartered two large yams and placed them in a small baking dish with butter and cinnamon and placed it in the microwave.

Rose poured coffee, and when she went to the patio, Cecil took another cup and joined her at the patio table. When he sat down, Fritz sat up, wagging his tail. Cecil reached down for a rope chew toy and tossed it over Fritz’s head. The old dog did not move as it sailed past him, but when it landed, he chased it and sniffed it. He left it in the yard, and trotted up to Cecil.

“He must be going blind,” Cecil said.

“He’s getting old, and he’s wearing out,” Rose said matter-of-factly as if she were talking about a twelve-year-old television set or car.

In that moment, and for just a moment, Cecil could see a future day with Fritz hoisted onto a veterinary exam table and the vet measuring out the dosage of pentobarbital to ease Fritz out of this life. And he thought for a moment to get past the obvious comment that he, Rose, and Claire were also getting old and wearing out.

“He’s been a great dog, Rose,” Cecil said. “I’m not sure I’d want to replace him when he’s gone.”

“Jason’s going to school in San Antonio means he will probably find a job there,” Rose said. “We may want to travel as much as we can; maybe even move toward the coast.”

“I guess that depends if I ever catch on with someone needing a graphic designer,” Cecil said. He was worried about how long their retirement nest egg would last if they continued to dip into it before he could draw Social Security in a dozen years.

“Maybe you should look beyond the Metroplex,” Rose said.

“Your doctors are here,” Cecil said, realizing that argument was beginning to feel like an excuse. “Let’s enjoy today, Rose. Despite our worries, we’ve got a lot to be thankful for.”

Inside around the table, Jason, Rose and Cecil took their usual chairs at the dining room table. Claire hesitated to pick a chair until Jason motioned her over.

“Sit here, Grandma,” Jason said, and he pulled out the chair next to him.

“For a table blessing, today, let’s share what each of us is thankful for,” Rose said. “I’m thankful for my water aerobics class for giving me exercise that strengthens me without causing pain.” She looked across at Jason

“I’m thankful that I’ve gotten accepted at UT-San Antonio for a career that has a big demand, and is something that I’m interested in and good at.”

Claire smiled, causing Cecil to recall how she had chewed on him about the arrangement his father had made with him for college. “I’ve got my health and places to go so I don’t have to just sit at home,” she said.

Cecil cleared his throat. “I could keep it simple and say that I’m grateful for family, but that would be something that one might expect in the Norman Rockwell illustration of Thanksgiving.”

While Claire spooned out mashed potatoes and Jason slid the turkey platter toward his plate, Cecil continued. “There was a time when I was younger I was uncertain if we’d ever sit down like this, but when Dad passed away, I realized just how much you gave him, Claire; he would not have lived as long as he did had it not been for you.

“Thus, Jason, you got to know a grandfather on my side of the family,” Cecil said, and he turned to Rose. “At times, we seem consumed with paying for your medical bills and prescriptions. But those, Sweetheart, are just circumstances. You’ve given me everything you could give, so today, I’m thankful to sit next to you.”

Today was not a day to worry how things would be paid for, or if he would find another job after two years of sending out resumes, or how Jason would do on his own. And as he completed serving his plate, he resolved that he would only consider how this moment, however far it might be from a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving, was what mattered for now.

The turkey, dressing, potatoes, the pies – all were just symbols that had no power to draw perfection into Cecil’s life. This dinner grew out of a rash moment with Claire that led him to Rose and a life that had its share of adventure, laughter and joy to outweigh the fears and disappointments. What mattered now was how Claire had lit up

because Jason was her grandson from the first visit as a baby to the more recent trips when Jason would clear the gutters and help around her house. For in Jason's eyes, they were Grandma and Grandpa. And in return, Claire would bake cookies when Jason was there for a visit. That we were all here, in this house, Cecil thought, that is what mattered.