

## The Ride

Marge had told Henry that they both had doctor appointments today. She had told him last week and, again, yesterday, but he didn't remember. He stood in the middle of his bedroom and looked around for his clothes. Where had he put his shirt? He could see her mouth moving and the frustration growing on her face. He knew she was yelling now, and, in his head, he could hear the resentment that clung to every word. Trouble was, he couldn't hear the words she was actually saying.

The hearing aids had cost over a thousand dollars. They were very small, and had tiny, little buttons. The settings were touchy, difficult to adjust, and made a terrible squeal unless

they were set just right. For someone with large, older hands, they were a challenge. On the dresser now, across the room, they looked like small life preservers floating far, far away.

Her mouth was still moving, and her hands were tightening on the handles of her walker. He decided or realized that she was nodding toward a pile of clothes on a box under the clothes rack. He shuffled over, picked up the pile and moved back to set down on the bed.

"Good God, why am I so tired?" he asked himself.

Marge turned with her walker and began to leave the room. As she neared the door, she slowed, making sure to lift her walker over the curling edge of the carpet remnant that had served as a runner. Really, how much trouble would it have been to have hired a carpet layer back when they built the house nearly 50 years ago? They hadn't, though, and, as she carefully stepped over the carpet's edge, she had an idea: she would find the silver duct tape and have the edge taped down next time someone visited. Problem solved.

The carpet wasn't the only thing that wasn't done when they built the house. The house was also waiting for cabinets in the kitchen, paint on the walls, and carpet padding under the carpet. They had always planned to have it done, but never got around to it. It wasn't an issue of money. There was always

plenty of money to buy whatever they wanted. They had married very young. Well, she had been young, anyway. Two weeks past fifteen, to be exact, and Henry had been twenty. They had married young, had children young, and they were still young after their children had grown up, got married, and moved out. She stayed at home, and he had continued to work. She often thought about the cabinets she'd like to have in the kitchen, but she never had them ordered or had them installed. Instead, she piled dishes on the counters on either side of the sink. She moved empty chairs against the wall beside the refrigerator on which to place other kitchen items. She also had a metal cabinet next to the stove and it housed plastic, everyday dishes. In the hall just outside the kitchen was a built-in cabinet. In it, she put the nicer dishes, vases, kitchen equipment, and aluminum foil; mostly the items she didn't use every day. Somehow, she had "made do" all these years without kitchen cabinets.

Only if someone looked closely, could the exposed nail heads be noticed peeking from the walls. She had always hung her grandchildren's artwork in the kitchen, so the eye caught that instead of the unfinished walls. Some of the artwork was decades old now, but she loved seeing it. If you removed those older works, a lighter colored wall appeared underneath.

The green sculpted carpet in the front room was well worn in the high traffic areas. Behind the sofa and under the end tables it appeared as new and untouched as the day it was put in, just maybe a little dusty. It appeared new because the various pieces of furniture had always been put in the same place in the front room. Every sofa went against the same wall, every recliner went next to the hall entrance, and every TV in the same corner in front of the picture window. The dining room was more of a dining area. It more just jutted off the living room, rather than being its own room. There was just barely enough room for a round dining table and chairs, and a smaller side table with a phone and chair next to it. This arrangement had never changed. The edge of the carpet between the dining area and the kitchen curled up and had never been finished with a metal strip. This would need duct tape, too.

Of the two bedrooms, only one had carpet and that carpet was orange. It also had a metal strip finishing the edge in the doorway to the hall and was the only one in the house. His bedroom never did get carpeted. It was only finished to the plywood sub-floor.

They had long had separate bedrooms. Over the years, grandchildren had asked with unabashed curiosity why they didn't sleep in the same room, and were told they had "back problems",

and "didn't like each other's beds". There was probably more truth in that last response than the little ones understood at the time.

As Henry watched Marge slowly navigate the walker and leave, he wondered again, where they were going and why he had to get dressed. He knew she would return, again, and again, so it was better to just get it done and keep the peace.

He asked Sheila how long she had had this car and if he watched her lips when she spoke, he could read them.

"Boy," he told her, "It sure rides nice and smooth."

Henry asked her that every time he went anywhere in her car, as if being in it each time was the first time. He still wasn't sure where they were going, but it didn't really matter. He was out of the house, he was breathing fresh, cooler air, and it felt good to have a change of scenery. Neither of them had been out of the house since the last doctor's appointment, three months earlier.

Sheila was the only one of their children they could count on to take them to their doctors' appointments now. Having somehow alienated their two sons, their only daughter was now the one who showed up to handle things. He couldn't remember what exactly had happened with Aaron and George, but they never

seemed to come around. In fact, he couldn't even remember the last time he had seen either of them.

Sheila, though, picked up their prescription medicines and shopped in town for them. At the last appointment, their doctor commented on how well they were getting along, but she was going to give him a little insight this time. She was going to tell him, in front of them or not, how Dad kept falling, how no one was there to help him, and how he had spent over two hours on the floor, waiting for help. And about Mom's problems, too; how her legs caused her so much pain, but that she wouldn't take any pain medicine. Yes, she's going to give him the low-down this time. Maybe he can talk some sense into them. God knows every time she suggests that they move closer to her, closer to family, she gets nowhere. Maybe, if **he** brings it up, **he** suggests it, just maybe they'll consider it.

They took the old highway into the city. It was a short ride, maybe 25 minutes. He looked out his window to the right and saw the road that led to the old farmhouse they had lived in when Sheila was little. He had tried his hand at farming then but didn't have a great deal of success. Life in that house had been good, though. Being outside every day, working the soil, it had satisfied him deeply, on the soul level, unlike anything he

had done since. He wondered if that house was still standing and if anybody lived in it now.

He began to think about the day they moved from the farm and into the small town where they now lived. They had hated leaving that house, but more than that, was the overwhelming feeling of his failure and the sad disappointment she had been unable or unwilling to hide from her face. He felt his eyes beginning to tear up and kept looking out the window until the urge to sob had passed.

He wondered why he was so emotional lately. This was only another episode in a series of outbursts. Maybe not outbursts, really, but more like a slow building of sadness that finally erupts into unstoppable tears. Maybe it was his age. He was going to be 93 this year. When he thought of the past for too long, what he remembered anyway, he was usually filled with a deep sense of regret. It felt like it happened so quickly, too. He knew, logically, aging had been gradual. Yet today, in the car riding into the city, it felt completely sudden. He was momentarily filled with a sense of anxiety, as if he had accidentally made a wrong turn and couldn't find his way back.

"I still have things to do. I can't be 92," he thought to himself. He realized in despair that he couldn't even leave the house by himself anymore, not after the accident. He couldn't

recall exactly what had happened that caused him to hit the utility pole. He remembered slowing the car for the curve, but it didn't seem that the car responded to the brakes. Thank God no one had been hurt.

He felt Sheila's hand on his arm and looked up at her face. She's going to drop them at the door, then park the car, she tells him. They wait in the entranceway for her and walk to the office together.

The doctor does all the usual doctor things and checks blood pressure, eyes, ears, nose, throat, listens to the heart, lungs, etc. He finds Sheila in the waiting room.

"They're doing fine," he tells her.

Her piercing stare tells him she disagrees. Sensing this could become a more detailed discussion, he asks her if she would like to step into an empty examination room. Yes, she would.

"No, they are NOT doing fine," she begins to tell him.

"Yes, they're okay. Their vitals are good, they seem to be getting along just fine," he tries to tell her before she cuts him off.

"Did she tell you Dad fell last week and laid on the floor for two hours until the paperboy delivered their paper? She had



to ask him to help her get Dad up off the floor. She wouldn't call anyone to help!" Sheila hisses insistently at him.

"No, they didn't mention that" he replies, as a crease begins to form between his eyes.

"Did she mention that her legs hurt her so much she can barely use her walker?" Sheila questions.

"No, that didn't come up, either" he says slowly, wondering how long this list will be.

"Well, their vitals may be 'fine' but they themselves are not. Their living conditions aren't 'fine' either. They are virtually prisoners in their own home, they are at least 35 minutes away from family, they need to move, and they need to hear it from someone besides me," Sheila says curtly.

"I can't make them move," he says, slowly shaking his head.

"I. Know. That." she replies, exasperation clipping every word. "But you can talk to them about their situation. Ask them more questions. They need to talk about this with someone **they** believe is objective. This is a dangerous situation for them, and they need to live somewhere they can get in and out by themselves. Can't you please just discuss it with them? Plant the seed, maybe? I know they don't want to live anywhere else, but I can't help them if they get hurt and the roads are bad or closed, or if there's a fire. What if there's a fire? Do you

understand that they cannot get out of their house by themselves? They fall and no one is there to help them! Can't you please help me?"

There. It was all out. The words had fallen from her mouth in a rush, all running together. Months of frustration, anger, guilt, and as it all tumbled out, it took every ounce of restraint for her to not grab him by the lapels of his white coat and shake him as she pleaded her case. She loved her parents, but, my God, she was 70 years old herself! Didn't he realize that? She wondered if he wouldn't discuss this with them, how much longer she would be able to help. What would happen when her body began to give out? When it hurt her legs too badly to help them in and out of there house and her car?

He went back to them in the waiting room as she composed herself. The frustration she felt grew. And grew and grew. It became tinged with resentment, then the resentment grew. How could they be so selfish, she wondered? And, so much more, it seemed, as they grew older.

It wasn't Dad, really. He was agreeable to just about anything she suggested. It was Mom. She was the difficult one. Mom had always wanted what she wanted, when she wanted it. Looking back, it had always seemed to work for her. She was stubborn, willful, and dug her heels in when it looked like

things might not go her way. She was spoiled, one could say, and while that term usually applied to children, it certainly fit Mom. Now, being 88 years old, not getting her way seemed only to magnify this character flaw. The frustration Mom felt when not getting her way manifested itself into meanness. A hatefulness, really, directed at anyone and no one in particular. Mom had made the comment, "Well, I never thought I'd end up like this." to her one time and she wanted to ask her, "How did you see it, if not like this?", but didn't.

Mom's house-boundedness only seemed to add to the childish nature she now displayed. Before the hip fracture, she would go to the little store in their town a few times a week. Now, she read the ads, called the store, placed her order, and waited for them to deliver. The only trouble was, there were items they didn't carry. For those things, she called Sheila and those calls came about every other day. When the delivery boy went on vacation for a week, she didn't know how she was going to get groceries. It was suggested that she simply place a larger order, before he left, for all the items they would need during his week-long absence. But, she didn't really think that was a good solution. What if they needed something else during that week and she hadn't thought of it? Well, she supposed, she would call Sheila while he was gone. Doing without that item never

occurred to her. And, her daughter living 35 minutes away didn't change the fact that she wanted what she wanted, when she wanted it. Period.

The doctor was of little help today. Her parents were his patients, not her. He understood her feelings, he said, but they were his top priority, and he knew they wanted to stay in their home as long as they could. His goal was to make that as possible as he could and keep them as comfortable as he could while doing that. But, he assured her; he knew exactly how she felt as he had faced the same situation with his mother. He thought it was best to be as "accommodating as possible" for as "long as possible". He suggested Sheila find ways to be more supportive and take comfort in knowing she was doing the best for her parents during their last years. She was feeling the anger grow inside and the tears threatening to burst out. She swallowed hard and just shook her head as he spoke. She now knew it was futile to ask him for any cooperation after this. He wasn't an ally, and that was the end of it. She realized she was going to have to do this herself and think more about how she could persuade her parents to see the situation clearly, the way she did. Before defeat and failure overwhelmed her, she realized she needed to put it out of her head for the moment. Right now, she just needed to get through the rest of the day. She would

try to figure it out on her own later. Now, without the doctor's help, Sheila knew she was on her own.

The restaurant wasn't very busy. It was 3:30 pm by the time they got loaded up from the doctor's office and across town to eat. Marge's legs were aching, and she was glad to sit down. Up and out of the car. Down and back in. She was really beginning to feel it. Having a menu to focus on was a good distraction. Henry hadn't had a salad in a while, and she didn't really think he'd eat it. She would order it for him anyway. Maybe he'd eat it before realizing he didn't like salad anymore. One could hope. She was just trying to keep him alive. He barely ate anything anymore. He wouldn't get out of bed until 3:00, sometimes 4:00 in the afternoon. By that time, he should have had two doses of medicine. It drove her crazy, all the trips down the hall to his bedroom, trying to wake him up, trying to keep him alive. He sure wasn't making it easy on her. Sometimes she would make a dozen trips to wake him up. Often times, he'd get up, use the bathroom, and go back to bed. He didn't mean to piss her off, he was just tired. Since he didn't wear those God forsaken hearing aids anymore, she had to yell, shout, shake the bed, and bang her walker on the floor until he woke up. It could take hours.

Their daily routine had remained largely unchanged for the past two years: she woke up between 9 and 10 a.m. She washed her face, brushed her teeth, then her hair. She rolled herself using her walker into the kitchen and set down at the table. The small oval table had two cleared spaces, one in front of her chair and another in front of his. Around the two cleared spaces were stacks of envelopes bound in rubber bands and papers, and in the center of the table was a small lamp. Inside the envelopes were paid bills, junk mail, and mail order catalogs. Getting mail, even junk mail, validated her somehow; made her feel that someone was thinking of her, even if it was an automated mailing list. She wouldn't part with the catalogs, being housebound now, she knew she may need something from one of them, so they were never thrown out. Just in case.

Every morning as she sat at her cleared space on the table, she tried to remember what day it was before looking at the calendar to see if she was right. One more day of getting it right was another day of feeling mentally sound, and at her age, she took great comfort in knowing that her memory was still intact. The next task was getting his medicine ready for him to take. It was becoming a nightmare to get pills into him. She always took hers, exactly on time, as she always had. He, though, wasn't so cooperative. At times, she wondered if she'd

have to resort to hiding the pills in his food like she did for a cat they had a when their children were young.

Once the medicine was sorted for the day, her next task was to see if it was the day for the girl to come and help. They were on their third girl now. The first one had an existing client whose needs were demanding more time, the second girl was assigned to another city, and now they had Tess. Tess was a bold one. She had made the mistake of using their facilities once while working in their home. The next time she worked in their house, she discovered a big note boldly printed in black marker taped to the bathroom door, "For Family Use Only." Tess never said a word about it but decided that a bathroom she wasn't allowed to use could be cleaned a little less thoroughly.

Yes, a salad would be in order today. The food arrived quickly. Marge's well-done hamburger with a side of mashed potatoes looked good, except for one thing: the lettuce leaf garnish. Yuck, she took her knife and flicked it off her plate onto the table.

"Why do they put that nasty wet lettuce on here?" Marge asked, to no one in particular.

Sheila didn't answer. She just looked at her mom and sighed. After years of defending people in the restaurant industry, she was just too tired today. Tired of answering the

same question, time after time. And, tired of her mom's resistance to seeing anything from anyone else's point of view. Sheila used to pick up the lettuce, or whatever the offending garnish was, and put it on her own plate, all while feeling the piercing stare of her mother. How would the waitress know to leave garnishes off Marge's plate if she didn't see it cast aside on the table? It never occurred to Marge to just politely ask the waitress, upon ordering, to please leave the garnish off her plate. But, over the course of the meals, she overcame her hostility and would leave a small token with the tip. Usually, it was a small, bite-sized candy bar, or a stick of gum. After the meal was over and the check was paid, they always had to sit at the table until the waitress came back over. She had to make sure "their girl" got it and it didn't end up in someone else's pocket. And, of course, she wanted to see the reaction of the waitress receiving not just a tip, but also the lovely, thoughtful token of her appreciation. In Sheila's mind, this gesture was made completely disingenuous by the lettuce incident, but she always smiled and played along, and so did the waitress.

The lunch, which was now an early dinner, went pretty well this time. Henry went to the bathroom before they left and found his way back to the table by himself. Sheila walked them to the



front door to wait for her to get the car, drive around and pick them up. She hurried as quickly as she could. She always worried he might wander off and become lost.

Once they were settled in the car, he wasn't sure where they were going next, but it didn't really matter. He looked down at his pant leg and noticed a stain about the size of a dime.

"Where did that come from?" he wondered to himself.

He tried to pick it off, but it was soaked in and only became whiter as he scraped at it with his fingernail. He couldn't leave it alone.

Now headed back, Sheila could feel a twinge above her left eye. It seemed that these "post doctor's office visit" headaches were occurring more often. She would take something when she got to her house later. She was not opposed medicating her pain.

The talk on the way home was light and centered on the medicines they were still taking, when they needed refills, and the next doctor's visit. Nothing was said about them moving to a house with a ramp, looking into assisted living facilities, or finding a house closer to family members. Inwardly, Sheila felt crushed and defeated. She had pinned so much hope on this day. Her mother, though, felt a wave of relief flow over her. She knew they were okay for at least a little while longer.

Every

day with Henry was a struggle for her, but at least she knew her battle and there were no surprises. Every day was just exactly like the day before. She found a peculiar comfort in the anger, and the sad, desperate routine.

The car sped along back toward home, and he continued to pick at the stain on his pants. He knew something had happened today, but he couldn't really remember what exactly. He was beginning to feel tired, though, and stopped trying to remember. He was ready to get home, change into pajamas, and crawl into bed. Defeated by the stain, he watched out the window. Beautiful, mature trees and gently rolling hills appeared as they once again passed the narrow road to the farmhouse where they once lived, while he wondered where it led.