

GRANDPA'S LAST STAND

I buried my wife. We didn't have a fancy service for her like you might see on TV for a celebrity, dignitary or some famous politician. Edie wouldn't have liked that. Yet it was still more hoopla than would have been my preference. Had it been up to me, I would have ditched the service and planted her in the garden under our favorite California pepper tree. Unfortunately, our son Mark bullied his way to the forefront. He insisted that we have a church service and graveside ceremony, mumbling something about God, our backyard and the law.

Pastor Bob concluded his graveside remarks and Mark announced that lunch would be served inside. There was really no need; most people had already broken into their quickest version of a sprint to the Fellowship Hall. I meandered in the opposite direction towards the wooded knoll overlooking the river to reminisce about Edie and grab a smoke. The river used to be wide with a swift flow until they dammed it up about 20 miles upstream back in '76. Edie and I liked to swim in a little pool on a secluded bend in the river concealed by a stand of Cottonwood trees. Pastor John caught us skinny dipping there one day, much to Edie's chagrin. Being witnessed by the pastor didn't bother her so much, but she was horrified by the prospect of Pastor John disclosing our indiscretion to her parents. Pastor Johnny Reb, so nicknamed by the kids on account of his Southern accent, gave us a good scolding. But he kept our little secret. Pastor John married us a few months later. Edie squeezed my hand and couldn't hold back a smile when Pastor John shot us both a well-timed wink at the altar. That was sixty-eight years ago.

Mark and our daughter-in-law Julie interrupted my reverie. Julie asked how I was holding up. Before I could reply, Mark chimed in while swatting away the smoke emanating from my cigarette.

"Now that mom is gone, there is really no need to continue that awful habit. You must be

well aware of the health issues posed by tobacco.” Mark said.

I hesitated to respond. The solemnity of the occasion demanded civility. But propriety is a threadbare costume in the closet of a man my age. “I’m 91 years old, and you advise that I cease smoking now? My dear mother died at age 94. She consumed jelly beans like a humpback whale swallowing an entire school of mackerel in a single gulp. She smoked at least two cigarettes for every fistful of jelly beans, and that was no small number. Are you suggesting that had she dumped the beans and the fags at 91, she might have made it to 95?”

Mark continued swishing and swash-buckling the smoke with the back of his hand. Talk about a drama king. Julie put her arm around me and said, “Let’s go inside, dad. Everyone would like to see you.” It was a kind gesture, even if I craved nothing other than solitude. Julie was always the amiable, non-confrontational one in the family. Not sure how she ended up with Mark.

The atmosphere in the Fellowship Hall was jovial, dry and warm. I strolled through the room and talked to several family members and well-wishers. Mark tapped my shoulder from behind, Julie at his side. Mark checked in as the hundredth or so person to ask me, “How are you doing?” or “How are you holding up?” Before I could spew the stock answer, he ripped the shrouds off his true mission.

“It will certainly be lonely with nobody left to talk to,” Mark said. “What are you planning to do with yourself now that you no longer have mom to care for?”

Julie cringed at the sight of another confrontation brewing between her father-in-law and her husband. “I’m sure I’ll find something to keep myself busy, Mark,” I said.

“I suppose you will want to sell that big house and find something smaller. Perhaps an assisted-care facility would suit you well,” Mark said.

And so the onslaught continued. Mark had been leading the charge pressuring me to move

into a nursing home for years; even though I'd been taking good care of Edie for the past ten years all by myself. Just as I concluded that I may not be able to come up with a second civil response; Julie saved the day. "We'd love it if you would come live closer to us," Julie said. "You could see the great grandkids play soccer and baseball, share family meals and we could visit each other regularly." The sincerity in her voice, and genuineness of her words captivated my interest. Until she added, "And we have a very nice Sunshine Manor just down the road that we think you would like."

I seethed inside, but concealed my anger. Edie wouldn't have appreciated a family fight on the day of her funeral. I'd lived in my house for nearly sixty years without any help from them. I would never move to a nursing home, not for Mark or Julie nor anybody else. The only person that would ever get me out of my house would be the mortician. But Julie was too sweet to contravene, so I did the gentlemanly thing and excused myself to the restroom. I walked straight through the washroom, and out the exterior door. I shuffled through the parking lot and plopped into my car. My phone dinged and I glanced down at a notification of the DMV appointment I'd forgotten to cancel. I turned the phone off and drove home.

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A few months later there was a harsh knock on the front door, one of those knocks that levitates you off your chair and sends cold chills spiraling throughout your body. The next knock demanded immediate attention. Had I owned a gun; I would have fetched it before answering the door. But Edie stipulated long ago that all guns be removed from the house.

I answered the door empty handed. A young, curly haired man with a cavalier, wise guy

smirk on his face pointed to a name on his clipboard and asked if that was me. In retrospect, I should have denied ever knowing that fellow and suggested that he had the wrong house. But without thinking, I merely nodded my head in the affirmative.

He yanked an envelope out of his back pocket and with all the sincerity of a mass murderer said, "Sorry old man, but you're served." Then he whacked the subpoena against my chest and stomped away.

I used to think that the worst thing that could ever happen to a parent was to have one of their children pre-decease them. Wow, I was sure wrong. Death comes to everyone. But very few parents ever experience their kids turning on them. I read the Notice of Mark's Application for Guardianship three times before the impact of his treachery set in. The subpoena to schedule the required psychological examination added a final exclamation point to the insult.

I would've thought he'd be more appreciative of all that his mother and I'd done for him over the years. Mark had always resented my long absences during his childhood. He reminded me of that from time to time. But I was a Colonel in the Marines and had no control of where I was deployed. He knew that. I was just doing my sworn duty. But Mark contended that my duty should have been to the family. Perhaps somewhere deep inside, the guardianship application was Mark's way of paying me back. Pity after all these years.

Even as a child, Mark was always the responsible one. Not only for himself, but for anybody else he deemed to be in need of his counsel. It took a lot of damn gall for him to think he had the right to step in and take over my life. But Mark never suffered from a lack of arrogance. This time, he'd gone too far.

I knew if Mark ever obtained guardianship over my life, the first thing he would do is throw me into one of those nursing homes. I'll never forget visiting my uncle Ralph in one of those hell-

holes, the stench of antiseptic death percolating through the halls. He sat in a chair all day, head bent over his knees, with drool hanging from his mouth. That's not the way I planned on spending my final days.

I wandered out to the back yard, settled into my favorite Adirondack chair and lit a cigarette. I didn't start smoking until my 85th birthday. I remember the day well. My wife of 62 years wobbled into the kitchen after dinner, her robe dangled upon her shoulders exposing mismatched pajama tops and bottoms. She seemed somewhat disoriented, like a sleepwalker awoken in the back yard at three in the morning after stumbling over a misplaced chair. I'd grown accustomed to the bewildered look. She asked whose birthday cake was sitting on the table. When I replied that it was my cake, she smiled and wished me "happy birthday." Then she inquired as to what I was doing in her house.

I assured her that it was our house and that we'd been sharing it for over 50 years. She didn't respond. I don't think she really believed me. Edie had been getting more and more forgetful. But at that moment, I felt her slipping away from me. I offered to brew her a cup of tea, but she said she was tired and wanted to go to bed. She rambled out of the kitchen, then turned back and stared at me for the longest moment. She said I looked familiar, but she couldn't recall my name.

It was a statement of fact uttered without apology or remorse. When a prompt reply was not forthcoming, she slumped off to the bedroom without saying good night.

I sat by the fire for at least an hour, pondering our plight. The disease was progressing faster than the doctor had predicted. Forty-five years of giving orders as a Colonel in the Marines did nothing to prepare or qualify me to handle her condition. All I could think about was the pact we made years earlier that we would always take care of each other, no matter what. We even wrote it down and signed at the bottom of the page. Of course, a written document wasn't really necessary.

We just did that on a whim, perhaps to prove to each other that we were serious and fully committed. Document or not, I would have never abandoned her or put her in a nursing home, not when she needed me the most. Nobody would ever take care of my Edie other than me. I just had to figure out how I was going to hold up my end of the bargain.

After checking up on her, I straggled down the road through the late-night mist. On an impulse, I drifted into the market on the corner and bought my first pack of cigarettes. The ones with a red bullseye on the package. Can't recall the name of the brand, some vague reference to good luck.

Both of my parents smoked. A cigarette hung out of mom's mouth most of the time, but dad only smoked when deep in thought or burdened by an overwhelming problem. It struck me that perhaps that might work for me too. I'd only taken one puff on a cigarette in my entire life, and that didn't go well. I gagged and choked so much that I vowed to never smoke again. And I didn't, until the day of my 85th birthday. The day my wife forgot who I was.

The doorbell interrupted my reminiscing. A polite knock followed, telling me that it wasn't the wise guy process server. So, I trudged into the house. When I opened the front door, I found enough lasagna to feed a high school football team, along with a note from Mrs. Clark across the street apologizing for running off. She was late for her hair appointment. She knew lasagna was my favorite and had been leaving me a batch every week since Edie's passing. A few days later, Mrs. Bradford baked me a chocolate cake. I was no longer so fond of sweets, traded them in for cigarettes a few years ago. But I appreciated the thoughtfulness. She stayed and talked for a spell, but my eyelids grew heavy half-way through her story about some vacation she'd been on with her husband and grandkids. I gave most of the cake to the dog next door.

Mark and Julie stopped by from time to time after the funeral, usually unannounced. I didn't

like that; they oft times caught me off guard and at my worst. But I hadn't heard from them since the Notice of Mark's Application for Guardianship was served.

The only other person that came to the house was Billy, the kid down the street. Every Saturday he mowed the lawn, pulled weeds, raked leaves, and did whatever else was needed in the yard. Took him a few hours. I'd leave him a nice \$20 bill under the doormat every week. Thought I was being generous until I read the note he left under the mat one day stating that his rate had gone up to \$30. I complied; sure didn't want to do all that work myself. A few weeks later I began feeling guilty about perhaps underpaying him all that time. So, I started leaving two \$20 bills under the mat each week. That assuaged my guilt, but it wasn't enough to retain his services. Soon thereafter he left a note informing me that he was going off to college and couldn't work for me anymore. Didn't know what I was going to do about the yard.

The slow trickle of visitors dwindled to an occasional drip in the month or so after being served. Spacing between showers expanded to days at a time and I didn't bother shaving most days. Certainly no need to get out of my pajamas on cold days. Daily walks turned into a stroll to the mailbox. I always loved to read, but now found myself falling asleep in the middle of chapters. I seemed to have lost my appetite and missed meals regularly. I felt myself slipping more and more into hermit-hood. But most disturbing, I didn't seem to have any strong desire to climb out.

Julie called one day and asked if they could visit. She said Mark wanted to talk things out and see if our issues could be resolved without lawyers. I told her that I'd cook dinner for them. But I thought to myself; they didn't need a lawyer, but they'll have to hire an army if they wanted to shove me out of my house.

They arrived mid-afternoon the following Sunday. Mark flapped his hand in the air. "Please open some windows, Julie."

I said, "It was a long drive just to nag me about my smoking, Mark."

Julie didn't even flinch towards the window. "And it'll be an even longer drive home. Cut the drama, Mark." She tossed him a look that every man dreads receiving from his wife while she zipped her index finger across her throat.

We sat down for dinner and Mark spoke first. "Your yard looks horrible, pop. The grass hasn't been cut for weeks."

Julie added, "Your neighbors must be aghast. Have they not complained?" It seemed there was a not-so-sweet side to sweet Julie.

Mark resumed. "Dad, the real reason for our visit is that we would very much like you to consider moving closer to us. We love you and would like to see you more. But we are so busy with our jobs, kids, and grandkids, it's hard to visit with you so far away. So, what do you say, pop?"

"I've lived in this house most of my life," I said. "And I've got no plans to move, now or ever."

"Look, pop. We all get old and aren't as sharp as we used to be. Someday I'll be in your shoes," Mark said. "But for now, I feel responsible for your well-being."

"I can darn well take care of myself. Besides, where would you propose that I live? With you and Julie?" I said. I tried to contain my amusement. I knew Mark wouldn't like that, but it was good to see him squirm a bit. "I don't think I could live with a Smoke-A-Phobic."

"Well, that probably wouldn't be best for you, pop. There's so much commotion with the grandkids always coming by, and the noise from their music and friends. You know how it is."

I didn't reply. I enjoyed watching Mark fidget some.

"We think if you would visit Sunshine Manor, you would like and appreciate the facility," Mark said. "They offer a nice two-room apartment with a bedroom and small living room. There

are other people to socialize with. And there is always someone there to help if you need it.”

Julie chimed in, “You’ve lost weight and your color isn’t good. The excellent food at the Manor should bring you right back to life.”

I smiled, but was at a loss for an appropriate retort. Perhaps the sweet side of Julie was an illusion from the beginning.

Mark added, “The nursing staff is on duty 24 hours per day and the ER is only five minutes away.” I noted a tiny uptick in the corners of his mouth as he uttered ‘ER.’

“It’s one of the top-rated assisted care facilities in the state,” Julie said. “All we ask is that you consider it. Pay them a visit; we’ll come pick you up.”

“You’ll be pleased to know that I’m a step ahead of you,” I said. “In anticipation of this topic arising, I have given serious deliberation to Sunshine Manor and spent a considerable amount of time researching the facility online.”

“Splendid,” Mark blurted. “We’re delighted.”

“When the website didn’t answer all my questions, I called them. Had a nice talk with the Head Supervisor, Mrs. Blake, I believe.”

“That’s exciting. How did you like it?” Julie asked

“Mrs. Blake was very pleasant. And the facility seems top notch. Regrettably, I find myself unable to reside at the Sunshine Manor.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, why not?” Mark exclaimed.

“Sunshine Manor is a smoke free facility,” I said.

They departed before I had a chance to serve dessert. Pity, I made a special trip to the bakery to buy blueberry cheesecake, Julie’s favorite. The dog next door was in for another treat.

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I stewed the next few days; emotions roller-coasted from hurt feelings to anger to ‘who cares’ to ‘screw you’ back to hurt feelings. The dial finally stopped at “NO,” *No, no, no. I do not accept their edict. I’ll fight back, that’s what I’ll do. They’ll not stick me in that smoke-free nursing home. I’m the captain of my life, not Mark or anybody else.* I called the next morning and scheduled my psychological examination with Dr. Carol Maloney.

I arrived at Dr. Maloney’s office the following Friday half an hour early, clean shaven and freshly showered. She was friendly, perhaps a bit too chummy. She insisted that I call her Carol.

Carol reeled me in with a string of easy questions, name, address, my favorite baseball team and who I thought would win the Super Bowl. Carol Maloney was calm, subtle in her movements, mild in her manner of speech, and smiled with sincere interest at every question. She reached for a notepad, picked up a pen, and ratcheted it up a bit; getting a little more personal. “What do you do for entertainment?” “Do you ever go to the movies or the theatre?” “How do you get along with your neighbors?” She noted my hesitation and jotted a few notes. “How often do you get out of the house?” “Are you eating well?” I stuttered a bit and she scribbled some more.

Then Dr. Maloney charged in for the kill. “How many cigarettes are you smoking each day?” I stammered that I didn’t keep track. “Are you showering and shaving every day?” I mumbled that I shower whenever necessary. “Once a week, twice a week?” I tried to regain the upper hand with strength and confidence. I noted that cowboys in the Old West only bathed a few times per year. I knew at once that this was not a judicious remark. But like an ill-advised email, it was irretrievable upon smacking the send button. A slight smirk appeared on her face, but she didn’t comment. “Did you have your electricity turned off for a few days last month?” I wondered

how she knew about that. I explained that the electric company may have forgotten to send my bill, or perhaps it got misplaced amidst all the junk mail. "Really, three months in a row?" I offered a shrug, but she didn't seem satisfied. She asked if I'd had my driver's license revoked. I jerked back. She noted my startled reaction and scrawled a few more notes. Mark must have had spies all over town. I explained that I had another appointment next week with DMV to re-take my eye test. I expected her to write that down. She didn't. She asked if I had driven to her office that day. I didn't answer. Dr. Maloney then propelled an 8 by 10 photograph gliding across the table, coming to a stop right in front of me. Before looking at the photo, I wondered how many times she had practiced that maneuver to attain the maximum affect. I glanced down and knew at once that my day could not be salvaged. It was a picture of my ramshackle front yard, grass over a month long. Weeds cloaked whatever flowers may or may not have existed. Piles of leaves lingered from the last wind or two, and a large branch from my pepper tree rested atop a broken fence. "Has the appearance of your yard improved since this picture was taken?" I shook my head; there was no good answer.

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I slumped out of the office of Dr. Carol Maloney, knowing I had failed her psychological examination. I supposed Mark had probably already received the news and was reserving my spot in the Sunshine Manor at that very moment. I drove home and chain smoked the rest of the day. I was on my third Jack Daniels double when the doorbell rang; followed by a soft knock. Mrs. Clark stood at the door with a casserole pan of lasagna in hand. "May I join you for dinner?" I invited her in, happy for the company and the lasagna.

We talked about Italian recipes, the weather and our dead spouses. On my second helping of lasagna, Mrs. Clark asked, "Do you have any plans for your yard?"

I shuddered, embarrassed that the topic had been mentioned. "The condition of the garden should improve soon," I said. "I'll be selling the house and moving into the Sunshine Manor."

I think she noted my disheartened demeanor. "I'm relatively new to the neighborhood," she said. "But you've lived here a long time. Do you mind telling me why you are moving?"

"My son had been pressuring me to move into an assisted-care facility ever since Edie passed," I said. "Mark filed a guardianship application to force the issue. And I flunked the psychological examination this morning."

Mrs. Clark, Connie at her insistence, replied, "I certainly hope you will not cave in to this nonsense." Her feisty attitude made me wonder if she had experienced a similar predicament.

"I despise the thought of moving to that nursing home. Yet I fear that I will be forced to do so. I haven't slept since my son stepped in to ruin my life."

"We may be old, but we're still alive. And our lives belong to us, not to them," she said. "You've got a sound mind and you must stand up for your rights and fight." Her rhetoric took me back to the old days of inspiring my troops before combat.

"My sentiments exactly. But I really struck out in the psych exam. I barged into her office on a crusade, and limped out a humbled man. The judge places an extraordinary amount of weight on the psychiatrist's recommendation."

Connie reached across the table and placed both her hands atop mine. "It's not too late. We need to formulate a strategy. When is the hearing scheduled?" Her confidence reignited my optimism.

"The hearing is three weeks from today. What do you suggest?" I replied.

“We’ve got plenty of time, but we need to get hopping,” she said. I saw my younger self in the mirror and was pleased to have her on my side. “First of all, Billy’s younger brother Ricky is looking for work. I’ll call him tonight about getting your yard in order.”

“That’s good,” I said. “I’ll contact my CPA; have him send his bookkeeper out to help pay my bills on time and keep the money straight.” I poured us both another glass of wine. Nothing got my juices flowing more than sitting around the table formulating a battle plan.

“Last, and most importantly, we need to get you a job,” Connie said. “If you are gainfully employed, the judge will flush Mark’s application right down the toilet.”

“I don’t mind working. But there aren’t many job openings for a man my age.”

“My grandson, George, is the manager at the local McDonalds. I’ll have him call you this weekend to schedule an interview.”

“Ha, McDonalds,” I slapped my hand on the table. “That’ll rankle that meddlesome son of mine.”

I arose and scooted around the table. She stood up. I gave Mrs. Connie Clark a big hug and kissed her square on the lips. “Thank you.” Hard to lose with General Patton on your side.

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Billy came by the next morning, his brother Ricky in tow. Billy sang his sibling’s praises and Ricky assured me that he would do the same good job Billy did. But he wanted to start with two \$20 bills each Saturday. I hired Ricky; no squabbling over the price. I promised to pay him extra to get things caught up. He started that day.

George set up my interview Monday morning with his assistant manager, Maria. I hadn’t

been on a job interview in nearly 70 years, but I wasn't nervous. I had the feeling that the path to employment would be mine for the asking. Mrs. Clark was a hard woman to say no to. I had a friendly chat with Maria and answered all her questions. She said I was the oldest applicant they ever had. Maria hired me on the spot. We didn't discuss compensation; I didn't care. I would be back in my rocking chair in a few weeks.

The next day, I showed up early for my first four-hour shift at the McDonalds on Third Street. Maria assigned Lissette to show me around. She provided instruction and answered my questions. It felt a bit awkward reporting to a girl who looked like she was still in high school plowing through the late stages of puberty. But I didn't mind. How hard could a job like this be? I just needed to see my way through the next few weeks and regain my freedom. Lissette emphasized that smoking was prohibited, even on breaks. I could manage to abstain for four hours.

Lissette placed me on clean up duty the first few days. I cleared tables, re-stocked the condiments, kept the floors clean and smiled at the customers. My hourly rate was less than Ricky's, but the work was easier. The kids made a mess, especially the toddlers. But the restaurant was small and easy to keep clean. I enjoyed working out front with the customers. I hadn't smiled and said hello so many times in a day for decades, probably in my entire life. It seemed that a smile generally elicited a smile in return, was rarely ignored, and never evoked a scowl. I chatted with customers, fetched drinks and condiments for them and caught myself whistling as I scurried about. When Lissette admired my whistling, I thought of my mom. She always said that only happy people whistle while they work. I'd always pooh-poohed that saying. Now I had reconsidered.

One day a little boy of about eight or so spilled ketchup all over the front of his shirt. His mother gave him a severe scolding to the point of bringing the boy to tears. I offered to try to remove the stain, but the mother insisted that there was no point, the shirt was ruined. "Well then,

there's no downside to letting me give it a whiri." The boy recognized the slight prospect for reprieve. He ripped off his shirt and handed it to me. The mother shook her head, but offered her reluctant consent by flapping her hand at the wrist, much like Mark waves at my cigarette smoke. I took the shirt to the back and got to work on the garment for about fifteen minutes. When I returned the shirt, the mother was appreciative, and I was the boy's favorite super-hero for the day. Maria tossed me a thumbs up from across the room.

Over the next few weeks I worked the register, assembled Big Macs, tossed salad and did whatever else Lissette asked me to do. She kept me out front most of the time. Lissette knew I relished interacting with the customers. Most of the crew were good to work with. Todd toiled in the kitchen and carried a full load at the local JC. Jose worked the drive thru window. Karen, the other senior citizen 20 years my junior, lived with her twin sister and accepted no task other than the register. Lissette always seemed to have boyfriend problems, but never let it affect her pleasant demeanor at work. Jack was an ass. Hopefully he would get fired soon. Maria gave me the day off for my hearing.

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I'm thankful Edie didn't have to see me sitting in a courtroom at a table opposite our only son, daughter-in-law, and their lawyer. Much of the family sat in the gallery. I settled at the table across the room with my attorney, Charlie Richards. Charlie was an old buddy from my days in the Marines, best JAG lawyer I knew. He was not much younger than me and had been retired for years. But he didn't hesitate for a second when I asked him to help me out.

In his opening statement, Mark's attorney buttered up the judge by telling him how much

Mark loved his father and had only his well-being and best interests in mind. I bristled. How could a stranger possibly know this? Charlie noted my agitation and calmed me down with a pat on my knee and a finger to his lips. The attorney continued, laying out all the reasons why I needed a legal guardian. *Can't handle his finances, eats poorly, lacks good hygiene, yard was in shambles, smokes excessively, needs to be near his family, poor eyesight, drives around town without a license, and can't take care of himself. At that point, he kept talking and I stopped listening.* Desperation set in with every word delivered so convincingly and with such eloquence. Mark's lawyer rattled off my flaws and shortcomings. It struck me just how far I had fallen. Once the proud, confident Colonel who inspired trust, allegiance and admiration from his troops. Now this. I glanced over at Charlie, his facial expression devoid of emotion. All I saw was thinning white hair, sagging skin, liver spots and a 30-year-old suit and tie. I closed my eyes and prayed that Charlie was somehow still up to the task.

Mark's attorney called Dr. Carol Maloney as their first witness. She left her friendly disposition and phony smile back at the office. The doctor wore an expensive red business suit and focused on the issue of my competence. She poured through every painful detail of my psychological examination, consulting her exam notes for confirmation. Half an hour later Mark's attorney asked for her conclusion. She removed her glasses and stated that, in her professional opinion, I could not properly take care of myself and should reside in an assisted care facility in near proximity to my family members.

The judge asked Charlie, "Do you have any questions for Dr. Maloney?" Charlie remained seated, paused longer than seemed necessary, then asked the psychiatrist if I suffered from Alzheimer's disease or dementia. She answered no, then Charlie dismissed her.

Mark's attorney concluded his case and the judge asked Charlie to proceed with our case.

Charlie kept his head down, shuffling through the documents before him. His movements were slow, methodical and laborious. Had it been anybody else's life at stake other than my own, I might have nodded off. The judge grew restless and prompted him to action. Charlie didn't respond, but with assistance from the edge of the table and his cane, he rose to his feet.

"I have three pieces of evidence," Charlie said. On the judge's bench he laid out a picture of Ricky mowing the lawn and one taken from the street proving my yard to be in tip-top shape. The judge studied the photos, then instructed the bailiff to show the pictures to Mark and his attorney.

Charlie retreated to his desk, then hobbled back to the bench. He handed the judge a letter from Martin & Myers, CPAs, stating that they had been employed to send a bookkeeper to my house twice per month to pay my bills, deposit checks and reconcile my bank account. The letter went on to state that my finances were in excellent condition.

Last, Charlie presented the judge a copy of my McDonalds pay stub along with a letter from the manager, George Clark. The letter stated that I was a valuable employee who worked at least four days per week. My eye caught Julie tapping Mark's arm and emphasizing some part of the McDonalds letter to him.

Charlie offered no exposition with the documents. The judge offered no insight as to the affect the evidence had on him. The smile on the face of Mark's attorney announced his belief that our evidence wasn't enough to sway the judge. I couldn't eradicate the young attorney's words and the testimony of Dr. Carol Maloney from my mind.

Charlie said, "We would like to call Connie Clark as our first witness." I turned to Charlie, but he ignored my query. We hadn't discussed witnesses. He contended the evidence would be sufficient. Charlie charted his own path, and I had no choice but to trust my old friend.

After the usual introductions identifying Mrs. Clark as my across the street neighbor,

Charlie asked her assessment of the portrayal painted by Dr. Maloney and Mark's attorney.

Connie replied, "I wouldn't dispute their conclusions. But they have not told the entire story." She went on to explain in detail that after Edie's passing I lapsed into a month's long depression. "He not only lost his spouse; he lost his purpose in life. It's a mighty blow to the human spirit when you are no longer needed, and your life loses its relevance." She paused and glanced my way, then continued. "Mark's guardianship application demoralized him. Ironically, it was the jolt that brought him back to life. Since that time, he's corrected each item on Dr. Maloney's list and is now leading a rich, satisfying life."

Mark's attorney rose to cross exam Mrs. Clark, but Julie motioned him to sit down. She whispered into Mark's ear for a full minute, perhaps two. Mark nodded his head, but did not speak. Finally, Mark stood; he looked shaken. I think he was welling up a bit. He stated that he would like to withdraw his application. Perhaps my initial conclusion about sweet Julie was correct after all.

Judge pounded his gavel. "Case dismissed."

On Monday morning I strode into the McDonalds on Third Street and quit my job.

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Mark and Julie visited me a few days later. The following Sunday, Mark and Julie joined Connie and me for a lasagna dinner. We laughed like in the old days and Mark never once mentioned my cigarettes or waved at my smoke.

Several days passed without another visitor or even a phone call. The days turned to weeks and the weeks to a month. I missed more than a few meals here and there and I couldn't attest to showering and shaving every day. Loneliness crept back into my life.

Julie came by one day and we strolled down to the McDonalds on Third Street for lunch. It was my first time back. The whole gang was there, Maria, Lissette, Todd, Jose, Karen. Everyone except Jack; he'd been fired for cursing at a customer. Good riddance. They were all happy to see me and wished me well, but they had jobs to do. As they retreated to their duties, I felt myself choking up a bit. I missed them more than I'd expected. It occurred to me that my happiest days since Edie passed were my few weeks at McDonalds. I liked my new friends, enjoyed the customers and reveled in being a useful member of a team.

George Clark sat down at our table. He said they all missed me and were disappointed that I had left. I glanced at Julie. She smiled and nodded her head. She knew what I was thinking.

I told George I missed everyone, too. Then I asked him if there was any chance of getting my job back. He grinned and told me I was one the best workers they had.

I reported for work the next morning. It felt good to be needed again.

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