

## Monday

Monday began like any other summer day in South Venice; oppressively hot, not from temperature but humidity. The windows of Dale and Patricia's patio home were left open overnight, but the mid-morning heat was never tempered by the inlet breeze. Their friends in luxury villas, only a few miles away on the gulf coast, would not fare well to rely solely on the coastal breeze and foregoing air conditioning. It was out of frugality, not fiscal necessity, that they turned the air conditioning off when just the two of them were home. Manners would not subject guests to this living condition they had grown accustomed to. Likewise, the inlet facing patio home in lieu of an oceanside villa was a matter of choice rather than financial discipline.

Patricia sat in the recliner fanning herself with a folded newspaper, while *TODAY* projected from the television screen at a low volume. The clanking of the fan, loose on its mount, cut through Hoda Kotb and Kathie Lee Gifford's words during the fourth hour

of the program. Patricia wore a loose cotton housecoat. The collar was damp with sweat, and air from the fanning of the newspaper caked thin wisps of hair to her forehead.

Patricia could hear rustling down the hall way that connected the family room where she sat to the rest of the compact patio home. From the noise, she could tell that Dale, her husband, was rising from his long sleep. Some days, he would sleep well past noon, exhausted by the body that was failing him. The rustling sound from the hallway turned to clanking as Dale inched closer to his destination, pausing after each step to rest his weight on the walker.

“Pat,” Dale hollered from the hallway. His voice was low and strained. He sounded breathy from the oxygen tubes, which were not adjusted properly under his nose.

“Yes, Dale,” Patricia said from her chair. She spoke loudly to be sure Dale could hear.

“Pat,” Dale shouted again, this time with more rasp in his throat.

“Yes, Dale,” Patricia said even louder from her chair. She rolled her eyes, presuming Dale had taken out his hearing aids or at least adjusted the volume on them again.

“Patricia,” Dale shouted, a metal sound accompanying the shout, as if he had slammed the walker against the wall. She knew he did not have the strength to accomplish such a feat despite the fact that he had been young and able bodied once upon a time.

“What, Dale?” Patricia said as loudly as her voice would allow. She pushed the foot rest of the recliner underneath her with the strength of her legs from her own semi able body. Eighty years had worn on each of them, Dale more than her.

Dale's mobility and mind had been declining day over day, month over month, and year over year ever since his stroke fifteen years ago. At the time of the stroke, he had been in the hospital for surgery to repair an abdominal aortic aneurysm. Not surprisingly, the doctors attributed the aneurysm to Dale's fifty year smoking history. Despite a successful surgery, during recovery, the supply of blood to Dale's brain was interrupted. Had he not already been in the hospital for the aortic aneurysm, a near miracle that it had been caught before rupturing, he would have died within the time it took for the medics to arrive. In this unlikely case of already being present in the hospital's ICU, Dale was resuscitated and lived to make a modest recovery.

Recovery, as it was for Dale, returned his speech, his feeling and movement, his ability to smile, to laugh, and to be generally mobile. It was all different than it had been prior to the stroke. His speech would slur on an occasional word or he would struggle to find the right one at times. The feeling in his hands and feet was sometimes numb and his movements were slower, more strategic. He smiled, but not as big or as often as he had before. And he was mobile, but not without aid or the drag of one foot when he was at all tired. The stroke had changed things, changed him, and certainly changed marriage for him and Patricia.

Dale had been Patricia's rock for more than sixty years. Dale was a traditional patriarch and provider, at least he had been up until the time of his stroke. Patricia had raised their children with care. She was not unloving towards them, but was pragmatic in her parenting. She raised each of them to be independent and self-sufficient, showing them just enough love for them to know that she cared. The rest of her love was reserved for Dale.

After the stroke, Dale drained Patricia's love, needing and taking more than the reserve she had to give. He took the love she reserved for him, and each of the reserves she kept for the children. She wanted to be everything for him, the way he had been everything for her. She had been a caregiver to her children for all those years, and now she was a caregiver to him.

Patricia was tired, and her reserves were running out.

Patricia had finally lifted herself from the chair and traipsed her way over to the hallway opening. From here she could see Dale a couple steps from the single restroom in the house. The door to the restroom was halfway between the opening where she stood and the other end of the hallway where the door to their bedroom was. "What, Dale?" she asked again.

Dale paused, taking a deep breath in before saying to her, "Make me a sausage sandwich, Pat."

Patricia shifted her weight in her leather house slippers, which were sticking to her clammy feet, as she observed her husband continue inching towards the bathroom door. It looked to Patricia as if each movement, each inch he was able to step forward, hurt him. The handsome face she had kissed on her wedding day sixty-one years ago looked sunken and droopy. He had lost his teeth at one point in the last couple of years, and when he did not wear his dentures, like in the case of this morning, the lips she had kissed on that same wedding day were curled inward, as if his hard breaths were sucking them into his mouth.

Patricia did not correct his manners, did not reply or acknowledge his request, but did turn from the hallway opening and walked in the direction of the kitchen. She fetched a roll of sausage from the fridge. She noted the expiration date printed on the white plastic casing, and though a few days had passed since then, she set it on the counter to be cooked.

Patricia used scissors from the knife block on the counter to snip one end of the casing. She pushed the cold meat through the sleeve of plastic from the other end until it plopped onto the glass cutting board where she positioned it along with some plastic wrapped cheese and two ends of white bread. She used a knife to slice thick patties of the grey-pink meat while the frying pan heated on the stove top. She set each slice into the large pan, smashing them into one another to make the whole roll of meat fit. She licked the sweat beading above her lip as she listened to the sausage sear in the pan.

As Patricia watched and waited for the bottom of the meat slices to change color, she thought of what she might do the rest of the day. She had some books to return to the library. Maybe while in town for that errand, she would stop at the nail spa to have a manicure. She would need to be back before too late in the afternoon to avoid any traffic. Besides, she had bridge with the neighborhood ladies tonight at the clubhouse. The meat was turning a darker grey, almost brown, and she began flipping each slice in the pan with a plastic spatula. The grease popped and the meat made a searing, sizzling sound in the pan.

Patricia thought she heard Dale calling from the bathroom, but could not quite make out the words from where she stood. "Give me a minute," she shouted. He could wait to be wiped until she finished cooking his god damned sausage sandwich.

As Patricia finished preparing Dale's breakfast, she nibbled at one of the misshapen sausage patties. She plated the sandwich and carried it with her when she reentered the family room. From the screen of the television set, she saw that the fourth hour of *TODAY* had finished. She set the plate on the table between their two chairs, the one where she had been seated earlier and Dale's lift chair, so it would be waiting for him when he was ready to eat.

As Patricia approached the hallway opening, the weight of silence overcame her senses. She did not hear Dale's rustling. She did not hear his hands fumbling on the counter to reach for things while he waited on the toilet for her impending arrival. She did not hear the wheezing sound that normally expelled from his lungs or his labored breathing.

"Dale," Patricia called to him from the doorway to the bathroom. The door was open, as he always left it, but instead of telling her that he was ready to be wiped, Dale was slumped forward. His arms were limply hanging from the side handles of his walker. They were bent at the elbows and his hands were open, as if they had been reaching out for something. "Dale," she said again, but he did not respond.

Patricia reached forward to touch his head, stroke his hair. She hurried, as fast as she could hurry, to their bedroom at the other end of the hall to call 911. She heard the ring in her ear from the landline phone, and wondered why she had hurried at all, knowing that the speed of what happened next would not change the outcome.

Dale was already gone.

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Patricia stayed there, at the edge of their bed, with the phone in her lap until the paramedics arrived. The coroner was on the way too, and would be shortly behind, one of the medics had let her know. Patricia stayed in the bedroom, watching through the bedroom door from the same spot she had been as the medics lifted Dale from the toilet and set his body on the floor of the hallway. She had a perfect line of sight from the place she sat to the spot where they worked. The hallway had been too small for the medics' rolling gurney, so they rested Dale's lifeless body on a cot which they would later carry him out of the house on. The medics hovered, appearing to do something, perhaps just keeping their hands busy, while they waited for the coroner to arrive.

When the coroner did arrive, the woman asked Patricia if she would like them to cover her husband with a blanket. Dale's pants were still around his ankles, despite the medics' apparent busy work. "Yes, please," Patricia said.

The coroner was young, soft-looking, and gentle. She looked to Patricia as though she could have been one of their grandchildren. Patricia appreciated the consideration, but was curt in her delivery. "Just don't cover his face," Patricia told the coroner. "I don't want his face covered," she insisted.

The coroner shared an empathetic smile. "I understand," the coroner said.

The process was quick, professional even, if professionalism is a consideration when processing the dead. When the coroner did give the medics permission to move Dale's body from the hallway, they lifted the cot and carried him into the family room. The medics held him as still as they could from each end of the cot, so that Patricia could have a moment with him before they transported his body to the funeral home.

Dale's mouth was slightly ajar, as if he had been trying to say something at that exact moment his body failed him for the last time. Patricia felt the urge to put Dale's teeth in his mouth, to comb his hair and make him more presentable for the medics and coroner. One of his eyes was closed, the other open. She held the eyelid of his open eye closed while she bent slightly to kiss him. She touched her lips against his upper lip, just under his nose. After a gentle kiss, she whispered, "I love you," the same way he had always whispered the words to her after a kiss. As she stepped back, lifting herself away from Dale to give the medics space to carry him, the eye she had attempted to hold shut opened again.

Patricia watched the medics carry the cot out of the house.

Dale's wish was to be cremated. It crossed Patricia's mind that she might not see her husband's body, touch his face, ever again. She watched through the front window as the medics and coroner closed the doors to their vehicles, hiding Dale from her view. Patricia watched the coroner and medics drive away. The sun reflected so brightly in the windows of their vehicles that the figures on the other side were invisible.

Patricia never had to see them cover Dale's face, and this made her smile.

Patricia always thought that in these final moments there would be more.

More words.

More time.

More sadness.

Patricia wondered what she would have said, had she known earlier in the morning that today would have been their last day together. What words had not been

said over those sixty-one years of marriage, of togetherness? What had she not been able to say that would have meant more, more of anything and everything, today that she had withheld saying? She told him that she loved him. Was that not obvious? No one, she thought, could uphold vows of richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, without enough love to survive poorer and sickness. Or could they?

Patricia looked around the room. It was no emptier than it had been this morning, but she felt emptiness. She felt something had vacated the space where she stood. She felt for the first time, maybe ever, that she was alone. Not alone like she had been as an only child or when she had sought privacy or gone to the movies or had a meal by herself.

Dale was gone, and that was final.

Patricia was alone, and that felt final.

The low volume of the television was humming in her ear. Patricia wondered if she might still have time to go to the library before bridge at the clubhouse this afternoon, though she definitely would not have time for a manicure now. She walked to her chair, pushed her weight into the back of it, and propped her feet. She thought she should call the kids and let them know. She reached for the phone on the table between her chair and Dale's. Her hand rested on it a moment, but she did not pick it up. Instead she pulled the plate with the sausage sandwich into her lap.

Patricia remembered the last thing Dale had said to, replaying it over in her mind; *"...Make me a sausage sandwich..."*

Patricia took a bite into the sandwich she had prepared for Dale. The meat had cooled, but she ate every last bite while the television projected quietly.

Patricia changed the channel to Home Shopping Network, while making another mental note to call each of the kids before the end of the day.

As for now, she was alone.