

Days End – In Three Acts

Act I

The coffee begins to perk. I am awake and grateful for the coffeemaker's automatic setting. The memory of my husband making coffee in the morning brings a smile. It is five o'clock. Monday. Another week. Another shift. This time of year, I watch the sun rise before getting on the bus for the hour ride to work.

"Good morning, June." Ruby, the night shift aide, smiles as she tidies up from last night's emergency. "Mrs. Jenkins went to the ER last night." I picture the petite woman who has lived the last three months in bed. God, please bring her peace.

I clock in and head to my shift station thinking Mrs. Harrington first. She will wake and wonder where she is. Her family has not seen her since this whole thing began. I open her curtains. She has a window bed in the two-person room. A bird sits waiting in the empty feeder, an idea of the recreation department to bring a little nature to those who must live in these four walls, but the grant funds ran out, along with it being a job on my list.

"Morning Mrs. Harrington. June here. Sleep well?" She recognizes my face, and the fear dissipates into the pillow. I begin the daily routine, clean up, change, place her in the wheelchair.

"Dear, please have tea with me." She says as I hook the safety on her and her wheelchair, then set her breakfast on the tray before her.

Sally, my partner this shift, pops her head in "June, Mr. Reagan is being difficult. I need help. Oh, and Gerry called out – again. So, we are short-staffed – again." I am sorry I will not be able to take a few moments with Mrs. Harrington, and glad I do not have to fib a reason – again. Gerry. Why do they keep her? This is the third time this month. I get through getting everyone up, and have five minutes to swig the remains of the coffee from my bus ride in.

I love my work. Frustrating, yes. I do not see myself doing anything else. When my job evaporated ten years ago, I took advantage of those government retraining funds and became a CNA. Never looked back. Fortuitous, because in addition to providing a new income stream, it made taking care of Mom, and then my husband (God rest their souls), just a bit easier.

"June, the nurses are done with rounds." Time for lunch? Where did the morning go!

This is my favorite time of the day, the main meal at noon. Every day the residents who are able are wheeled or walked to the dining room and join together a generation. Each have their favorite spot and dining partner. We try diligently to give them their little bit of consistency, but resources and death constantly plague us. Mr. Jones sits with Mr. Simpson every day. I hope Roy had the opportunity, second shift last night, to let him know Mr. Simpson has gone home. No one else would share that with him. Well, that's not true. Jamie. Hector. They know of the relationship shared between two old world companions. It is just getting the time.

Noon meal is a carousel ride. The CNAs wheel everyone in and no sooner done, then wheel everyone out. Now afternoon toilet changes and naps. Time to restock my linen closet for tomorrow – sheets, toiletries, etc. I must remember to tell the head nurse we need more diapers. Why am I unable to order them myself? It would save time.

Sally again. "June, Miss Stapleton's lunch did not agree with her, and I've got a bath to do before shift change, can you?" I nod yes. I've been there. Well, there goes another day leaving on time. I really do not mind. Now that I live alone, who is waiting for me at home? The cat? Yes, she is patient.

None of this seems right. How does life come to a close this way? A touch, a simple knock at the door before entering, so appreciated. There are so many simple things I do that mean so much. I must stop by Mr. Jones' room, water the flowers his daughter brought, and express my sympathies for Mr. Simpson.

It is three thirty, not bad, only a half hour overtime, and the bus does not get here until three forty-five. I will get home on time. Sacha will be happy. Well, if a cat can be happy.

It sometimes feels so futile, my work, but I know it is not. I repeat the same things – my name, the time of day, respond to needs, smile, and hope that a moment of touch or eye contact helps as I watch my charges slowly untether from this life.

Act II

My day begins with shift change. The CNAs and nurses share "Good Morning," which wakes me in my bed, like the song of birds in the morning. I am luckier than most who must call this home. I have a private room with a large window that brings in the morning light and slowly dims with the setting sun. My children have done their best to declinitize (Is there such a word?) my surroundings with family pictures and realistic fake plants. It is not in the CNA's job description to water real plants.

Home - it means many different things. A house in the mountains. An RV to travel the country. An apartment in the middle of the city. The places vary. The feeling, the same. No matter where you are, home is where you go when you seek solace. This is not home. Yet it is where I live.

I can hear you now, what about my children? They are old too, and I am a bit larger than a baby. Plus, they have families and houses and lives that consume their days. I fantasize joining their household, in my deepest fantasy we live in my house. One happy family. Then I remember my parents, back then, when I had children and career and enterprise. I know it is not feasible ... possible, yes ... feasible, no.

I have reached a place in my life many fear, if they live as long as I have. I am unable to take care of myself, too many activities that this old body requires help doing. Activities of daily living, ADLs, another acronym to sanitize the changes I am experiencing that did not cross my mind, until they did. All the steps to putting on a shirt in the morning that I took for granted until I became dependent on this wheelchair.

It happened so unexpectedly. I was home, it was early morning. I just did not feel right. I called my daughter, who quickly said, "Dad call the ambulance." We had not had the ambulance to the house since my wife passed away. I spent two weeks in the hospital, in bed, that was the first time. I never fully recovered. First a cane. The next time it was a walker. It was the wheelchair that ... oh hell, who am I kidding, it was the bathroom that brought ADLs and my helpers.

Here comes June. She is one of the CNAs I like. She sees me. "Good morning, Mr. Jones. June here. Sleep well?" She always greets me before rummaging through my tiny particle board armoire, if you can call it that, looking for a clean shirt, and pants I will soil because she will not

be able to answer my call button soon enough. It is not her fault the shift is short staffed – again. She will do a double shift today. She cares and I am grateful for that.

“How about your blue shirt and sweater today? They bring out your eyes.” I nod. What else am I supposed to do. This last bout of stomach whatever left getting dressed exhausting. Deciding what to wear is beyond the pale. Everything is beyond the pale. I never thought this would be me.

Breakfast is always in my room, which is fine as I have been a slower starter to the day since my wife’s passing. She was my starter, coffee perked and handed to me as I walked into the kitchen to gaze out at the new day until the coffee kicked in. A window feeder was left by the last resident of this room. I thank them. Sitting by my picture window I can watch the birds come for their breakfast while I eat. Besides my daughters, the birds are the only regular visitors I have.

I am an unraveling thread in this life, and I am scared of becoming untethered. It is not my death that I am afraid of, it is the letting go as I toss in the waves, buoys all around, red, right return. Just none I can tie up to and catch my wind.

It’s not that I have reached that state in life where I feel all I can do is sit here waiting for death. Yet isn’t that what we all are doing from the moment we are born ... waiting for death? However, before now, like everyone else, my life was full of distractions from that thought. Distractions I kept wishing to do away. Now I want them to haunt me instead of these scepters of old age.

I am making this sound horrible, aren’t I? Don’t get me wrong. I have lived a good life – wife, family, career. My last home was just a mile away from the ocean. I miss that house. That is part of the miserable. I am luckier than most. Did I say that? I have this private room and 24-hour care. The surroundings are pleasant. The halls have fresh flowers. The volunteers provide activities and company. I just cannot adjust to the thought of this being my final home. Things are missing. For one, all I have is this room, so could they please simply knock before entering? This is my home after all. Okay so it would be the same at my house ... by the water ... if someone were there taking care of me. They would just walk in, but if it bothered me, I feel I could say something. Here...

"Time to take your blood pressure, Mr. Jones," the nurse says as she enters the room instantly making it feel like a hospital room. What is her name? I am so embarrassed I cannot remember it. I see her every day, well at least Monday to Friday. Please say it so I can say it back. And we can connect. That's another thing missing – connection. Most of those I interact with are that kind of nice you get when you are eating out at a restaurant or looking for new clothes, the connection drifting away as soon as they do.

I sit here by my window, and it is noon already. Lunch time. Where did the morning go? Well at least now I get to be with other old timers for a while and feel less alone. Don't get me wrong - I like my alone time. Since my wife died, I have come to appreciate solitude, the comfort of all that is my life. I just never thought I would be this old. A time so unplannable. Alan knows, he is my lunch partner. He's been here for over a year and has no family. We both eat, very slowly. We talk little and know we are both fortunate to be able to afford this way of living. I close my eyes to keep away what it could be like. Ice cream, we both smile. We say our good-byes until tomorrow and head back to our respective rooms for an afternoon nap.

"Knock, knock. Dad?" wakes me from sleep. It is one of my daughters who helps me get through these late afternoon hours. They are the hardest. Second shift arrives and the whole atmosphere changes. It feels all they want to do is get us ready for bed. Heck it is only three o'clock! Automatic sunset with nine hours left until midnight. Today is our weekly drive. I cannot get in and out of the car easily. Change of scenery keeps me aware that the seasons still turn. She tries to seek out new sights to explore which is no easy feat given I have lived here almost 45 years. This is not half my life. God I am old. Hey, we've never been down this road. How lovely this autumn afternoon, when life is fullest, before the snows of winter. My daughter is quiet, wondering what I am thinking. How can I ... what words ... she holds my hand and we both smile.

It is four thirty as we return to the front door of the facility. My butt hurts. Sitting all day takes its toll. My daughter kisses me good-bye, waves as she retreats to her other life. Roy's on tonight and greets us as we enter my room. I like him. He has a simple heart and does what he can to ease my pains while getting me ready for bed. "Welcome back Mr. Jones. Did you have a pleasant drive?" He has such a nice smile as he brings supper which I take by my window and watch another day come to an end. I'll sleep okay until third shift change, that will only disturb for a few minutes. The thread of my life still flutters while off in the distance I continue to untether – partner, home, family.

Act III

My day begins as others, I quickly dress and pour myself a travel mug of coffee to get to my daughter's house in time for her and her husband to head for work and get the grandkids to their bus by 7:30 AM. While I do not wish them to grow up too fast, I await their becoming teenagers when they will greet the bus at eight in the morning. What a difference a half hour makes.

By the time I get home, Bob will be up and at the breakfast counter reading the morning paper, hard copy. This digital newspaper thing was not for him. Newsprint was made to be felt, he says. Retired now five years, I wondered how I got everything done and worked a fifty-hour week at the insurance company. Today is laundry day, Dad's too. I am unable to keep a sufficient supply of pants for his "accidents."

"Honey are you taking the car in for service or am I?" remembering it was due for an oil change.

"Can you? I've got to bring the lawn mower in for service today."

"Sure, on my way to Dad's." My end of the day routine made easier by my son-in-law's shift change to seven to three in the afternoon. It was difficult to get quality time with Dad before, being unable to get to the home before four in the afternoon. Dad does not like being late for five o'clock supper. Now I can get there sometimes by two in the afternoon and spend a couple of hours with him. Who knows how much more time ...

My phone rings. It is the home and only one o'clock. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Reinhart? This is Nancy, one of your father's nurses."

"Something wrong?"

"Your father is having an episode."

"I'll be right over." Another. How many more can he take runs through my thoughts.

"Honey, gotta go to the home. Dad's having an episode. Will do the car tomorrow." as I grab my keys and head out. Thank God we were able to find an open bed in the nursing home in town.

My father is 95 years living. His body is turning on him. For a man whose strength, body and mind, has been his companion throughout life, this betrayal is agonizing. The episodes need assistance. As I drive, I picture him ringing the call bell, a pretentious nemesis, and waiting, as a baby needing its mother. My father waits, as patiently as possible, the fifteen minutes for the nursing aide.

I get to his room, and the guilt rises. He is so helpless, and so am I. I then watch as a man, average in all aspects, comes to the door of this man who is frustrated, afraid and wanting so much to maintain his self-respect. The man stops just inside the room and with a smile looks to my father with eyes of concern, addressing him in a voice of regard that could not be forged. Though helpless in the bed, this individual sees the human being before him as he slowly untethers from this world.

It is difficult to describe the emotions that run through you as you watch a person's dignity so exposed, witnessing another individual care for the man, my father, with natural compassion and poise. In "Tuesdays with Morrie," about an individual who shares his coming to terms with terminal illness, there is a line when Morrie says, "Well, Ted, one day soon, someone's gonna have to wipe my ass." It is one thing to read such a statement, it is another to watch as the gentleman who gave me life, raised me, and has supported me throughout my 67 years is tended to, so intimately, by a stranger.

Epilogue

Somewhere along the way it seems we cross to a place where we no longer matter. What words exemplify how people in old age lose their self-worth because the people around them do not see them as souls deserving of dignity. Is this blindness out of fear for the day we might reach 95 years and need someone to clean us ... or feed us ... or get us out of bed?

This individual, this stranger, before me reminds me our humanity is constant. How is it some are unable to see this? Maybe that is not the question. Maybe the question is how do they never lost their ability to truly see people? Today my father's dignity was preserved, given the help he needed with sincere respect for the years of life he has lived. Today, I am shown how we avow our collective humanity.