

Joe and Edith

By William Cass

The night hadn't been good. Even though a hospital bed had been moved into their apartment for Edith a week before, she still managed to get past the guardrails twice. On the first occasion, Joe was awakened on the living room couch by the sound of her trying to get into the pantry closet. As he helped her back to bed, she told him wild-eyed that she was looking for her slippers. On the second, she made a mess emptying her ileostomy bag in the bathroom. He cleaned her up, grimacing at the stench, and then tucked the sheets as tightly as possible around her. It wasn't yet five o'clock, but he didn't chance trying to return to sleep; he made coffee and sat on the little porch of their third floor apartment watching dawn creep across the aqueduct and the roofs of central Phoenix in the near distance. He kept the sliding glass door open so he could hear anything from the bedroom.

Sitting there, Joe thought more about their circumstances. They were both eighty-three. When Edith's combination of renal and congestive heart failure had begun to worsen, he'd refused the suggestion of the director at their assisted living facility to move her up to the fourth floor where round-the-clock nursing was available. He would take care of her himself, he'd said.

However, he'd agreed to hospice assistance after the last critical hospitalization several months ago. He'd been dealing with her worsening Alzheimer's for a number of years, so that just complicated things. But then earlier that week, her doctor had said that her defibrillator was basically the only thing keeping her heart beating anymore; she didn't even feel it when it activated.

Joe had asked, "How long?"

"Hard to say," the doctor told him. "Could be a few days, could be another month. I wouldn't guess much more than that." He put a hand on Joe's thin shoulder.

"The thing is," Joe said, "aside from the medical problems, sometimes she's completely lucid. Sometimes it's like nothing at all is wrong."

"I know." The doctor nodded. "That happens. Enjoy those moments."

Joe took a sip of coffee and made himself focus on who he'd need to contact after she passed. There really weren't many people. Their unmarried son, Todd, had died twenty years earlier. They'd outlived most of their old friends, and the only family member left was a cousin of Edith's who still lived in Duluth. The staff at the facility would put up an announcement on a placard at the front desk like they always did to notify other residents, so he wouldn't need to worry about that. He'd provide information for it: married sixty-five years, former longtime residents of Minnesota where they'd run a flower shop together, they'd met in high school, she'd been an accomplished pianist, she'd enjoyed gardening and knitting, she'd been kind-hearted and

volunteered widely. He wouldn't add that she was his best friend, his only one anymore, or that she could be confounding. Joe pictured the bottom drawer of their desk that was stuffed full of correspondence she received from the philanthropic organizations she'd donated to over time. There were close to a hundred, and she sent them each ten dollars annually; requests from one or another had been filling their mailbox for as long as he could remember. It was just one of the things that irked him about her.

May had arrived, and it would be too hot to be outside by noon. Except for an occasional vehicle going by in the street on the far side of the building, it was quiet. Joe tried to chase away those memories from their years together that plucked the most tender of strings inside of him, but a few wouldn't comply. He watched the horizon go from black to gray and then light pink before he went back inside to check on Edith. When he came into the room, she was sitting up in bed, blinking.

"Hello, there," she said. "You."

He bent down and kissed her forehead.

She raised her eyebrows and said, "You're somebody,"

"I'm Joe, your husband." He straightened the glasses that had come askew on his nose. "We're married."

"Joe," she repeated, and a little understanding crept into her eyes. "I knew you were someone special."

He smiled. "Would you like breakfast?"

"I think so," she said. "Shouldn't I have some?"

Her skin was like paper, and he could see her entire skull through her cap of white hair. He kissed the top of her head again and said, "Yes, I think you should."

"You decide," she mumbled and frowned. "You've always made the decisions for us. Always. Even when we were kids."

Joe thought, that's because you never could. But he didn't say it. He checked her ileostomy bag and found it still empty after the incident during the night. He opened the blinds partway, but not the window because she always complained about being cold. A little light filtered into the room, brightening things.

He went into the kitchen, made toast, buttered it, and cut off the crusts. They'd stopped eating in the dining room downstairs about six months earlier, but he still generally had something sent up for lunch and dinner. He poured cranberry juice into a plastic cup, secured the lid for sipping, and carried the meal into the bedroom. Edith had fallen back asleep, snoring softly with her mouth open. Joe sighed, adjusted the pillows behind her, brought the toast and juice back to the kitchen, and went to shower and change into clothes.

He was sitting on the couch watching the birds at the hanging feeder on the porch an hour or so later when he heard Edith moaning and went into the bedroom. When he took her hand, she awoke suddenly and said very clearly, "I was dreaming."

“All right,” Joe said. Her eyes were also clear. He squeezed her hand, and she rubbed her thumb slowly over his own.

“I was dreaming about our cabin at the lake. It was fall, and the leaves had begun to turn. I was sitting on the patio and you’d just tied up the fishing boat at the dock. You waved to me and held up a string of fish. You had a big grin on your face. I think they were pike.”

“They probably were.”

“Or perch.” She frowned, concentrating. “They may have been perch. But, it was late afternoon and the water had that fall light on it and a breeze twirled the leaves on the alders so they looked like sequins, you know. They’d already turned golden.”

“You loved the lake in the fall.”

She nodded, gazing straight ahead at the wall. Their wedding photograph hung nearby, but she wasn’t looking at that. He felt a little bubble rise inside him, something between hope and joy. Just a small bit of it.

He asked, “Would you like to try to eat something?”

“I think I could. I think I could do that. Help me out of this bed, would you?”

Joe lowered the railing and pushed her wheelchair to the side of the bed. He helped her stand and lower herself into the chair. He didn’t think she weighed even a hundred pounds anymore. He checked her bag and it was still empty. He pushed her into the bathroom, cleaned her face, arms, and legs with a washcloth, brushed her teeth, and combed her hair. As he was finishing, Edith’s eyes turned wide watching in the mirror. She said, “This isn’t Duluth.”

“No.” His shoulders fell as his eyes met hers in the mirror. “We moved from there a long time ago. Fifteen years.”

“Oh, you’re right,” she said. “Another decision of yours. The weather.”

Joe smiled, nodded, and pushed her into the living room next to the couch. He remade breakfast and fed her some toast and juice. In between bites and sips, she looked around the room. At one point, she said, “This is nice. This is a nice room.”

“Yes,” he told her. “Yes, it is.”

He rinsed the plate and cup and left them in the sink. The kitchen was separated from the living room by a counter that had stools in front of it that they hadn’t sat on for a long time. He looked over the counter at her while she surveyed the room. Her eyes met his and she smiled. He did the same, and the bubble rose up in him again. It was the longest she’d remained awake and engaged in more than a month.

“What would you like to do?” he asked. “Would you like to take a walk?”

She looked out the sliding glass door to the porch, then back to him. “All right,” she said. “I think that would be nice. We could walk outside if it’s not too hot.”

“I don’t think it’s too hot yet,” he said happily. He propped open their front door, pushed her out of it, and closed it again. He kept his hand on her arm as they rode down to the lobby in the elevator.

Joe had just gotten them to the building's front doors when Edith began seizing. Her legs and arms stiffened, her head jerked back, and her eyes rolled up into their sockets. Spittle formed at the corners of her mouth. It wasn't a particularly hard seizure, and she'd been having them occasionally since the last hospitalization, so Joe wasn't too concerned until she began to vomit. That hadn't happened before. Edith vomited once hard, then less violently twice more into the lap of her nightgown.

Joe bent down in front of her. Her head had slumped forward so that her chin was on her chest. Joe tilted it back carefully. She'd fallen asleep again. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the spittle from her mouth and chin. He mopped up the vomit in her lap until the handkerchief was saturated, then pushed her as quickly as he could to the elevator and back to their apartment. His hands trembled.

Edith didn't awaken as Joe cleaned her, emptied her bag, changed her nightgown, and shifted her from the wheelchair back into bed. He threw the soiled items into the washing machine, then went to the phone on the bedside table where he'd taped the hospice nurse's cell number. Her name was Gwen and he liked her a great deal, especially for her patience and easy sense of humor with Edith. It was Saturday and her day off, but she'd told Joe to call her if there was any problem and she'd come over. He knew she was running in a race that morning, her first 5K, so he wasn't surprised when he received her voice mail. He left her a message explaining things and asking her to come as soon as she could. Then he sat in the chair next to the bed, held his wife's hand, and watched her sleep. Her breathing seemed shallower. Every so often, he took off his glasses and wiped at the corners of his eyes.

Edith awoke suddenly about two hours later, startled. She smacked her lips, screwed up her nose, and announced, "I taste awful."

"You were sick," Joe told her. "I'll take care of it."

He gently re-brushed her teeth where she lay, and she was able to take a little water from the cup into her mouth and spit it into a bowl. He ignored the familiar weariness that spread over him as he leaned over her. He put the things he was holding on the floor and said, "That better?"

She looked at him, nodding, and recognition came abruptly and fully into her eyes. She put her hand on his and said, "You're Joe."

"Do you want more water?"

She shook her head, leaned back against the pillows, closed her eyes again, and said, "Joe, I'm very tired."

"I know."

"I'm just so tired, Joe."

He swallowed over the hardness in his throat. "Think of something nice. Like our cabin at the lake."

"That was a nice place," she said weakly. "I remember when we first made love there." She paused, her eyes still closed, their lids fluttering slightly. A long moment passed before she

resumed in little more than a whisper. “You were so tender and slow with me...it was wonderful.”

Her lips made a small smile, and his did the same as he stroked her hand. “I remember,” he said. “That’s a fine thing to think about.”

“Afterwards...we went skinny dipping.” He had to lean closer to hear her. “There was...a full moon.”

“Yes,” he said. It was all he could manage.

“I’m so tired, Joe. I think I need to sleep now, Joey. Goodnight.”

A second later, she was snoring again very lightly. Joe sat crying quietly, her hand like a feather in his own. The room had filled with mid-morning light. The air was still and warm. Birds tittered at the feeder, but he didn’t notice them. A little later, he watched Edith move her mouth in a yawning motion like a fish out of water. She shifted her shoulders as if she couldn’t get comfortable and grimaced in her sleep.

Joe went around to the other side of the bed and rearranged her pillows. Still, she yawned and shifted her shoulders, so he climbed up in bed next to her, turned on his side towards her, and put his arms around her. Her shifting stopped, but her breathing was very shallow. It came in tiny puffs until Joe realized suddenly that it had stopped altogether. She was completely still.

“No,” he whispered. “No, no, no.”

But he didn’t move. She’d wanted no extraordinary measures taken; they’d signed forms together years before. So, he just lay there holding her and weeping softly and steadily. Gwen would be there soon and would know what to do. There wasn’t any rush. What was there to hurry about? It was very warm in the room, but he didn’t get up to open a window. Her skin was still warm where his hand gripped her wrist. He didn’t want to move. He didn’t ever want to move.

William Cass has had over a hundred short stories accepted for publication in literary magazines and anthologies such as december, Briar Cliff Review, and Blood and Thunder. Recently, he was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at Glimmer Train and Black Hill Press, received a Pushcart nomination, and won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal. He lives in San Diego, California.