

A Thoughtful Man

Robert Linwood was a thoughtful man. He thought about everyday tasks which most people take for granted, and he was not afraid to try new things. When he was a teenager and his father taught him to shave, his father mentioned that he liked to shave immediately after his shower. Robert asked him why and his father just shrugged and said he guessed the shower softened his beard. Robert experimented with shaving before and after his shower. He could not detect any difference in the quality or the comfort of his shave, but he did discover that if he shaved first he could wash off the leftover shave cream in the shower. This saved both time and effort at the sink, so shaving first became a part of his daily routine. He also experimented to find the best point to interrupt his shave and turn on the shower. If he timed it just right, the water would be warm enough to let him begin his shower as soon as he finished his shave. If he turned on the water too late he'd have to wait for the water to warm up. Too early and he'd waste hot water.

Robert took the same thoughtful approach to every decision and he developed a daily routine that optimized his life. His ex-wife never understood this logical approach. She had no morning routine. She would wander into the bathroom, turn on the water, and then wander off to do something else while the shower warmed up. Usually she came back shortly afterward to take her shower. One morning she got distracted and waited so long that they were out of hot water when she returned. To Robert's surprise, instead of being mortified that she had wasted so much hot water, she was angry at him because he wasn't sympathetic. She seemed to think he should run out and buy a bigger water heater, or maybe get one of those "instant on" heaters that never runs out of hot water.

Once when his mother was visiting he was shocked to overhear her tell his wife that "Robert has always been a little OCD." "No," his wife had replied. "He's CDO. That's OCD in alphabetical order, as it should be." They both laughed at his expense. He was privately angered by this. He knew there was nothing obsessive or compulsive about his behavior, and he certainly didn't have a disorder. He thought about things, and he behaved in a logical manner. It was no disorder to do things the same way every day if that was in fact the most efficient way to do them. And he didn't optimize everything. He would waste time scraping the remnants of a tamper-resistant seal off the top of a vitamin bottle. He realized there was no real need to do this, but if he didn't do it the sight of those remnants bothered him. They were mute testimony to a job that was only half-finished. Robert was also tolerant of people who didn't do things his way. For example, while it seemed obvious to him that the "right" way to eat a piece of pie was to start at the pointed end, he had no quarrel with those who started at the other end. He had tried both ways and found that neither way offered an advantage in taste or in speed.

It wasn't pie eating, showering, or any other single irritant that caused his marriage to break up. It was the fact that he and his wife disagreed about everything. They got on each other's nerves. They argued about trivial matters. They found themselves "walking on eggshells," bending over backwards to avoid doing anything which might upset the other. Which meant, of course, that they were expecting an irrational reaction and were quick to take offense at the slightest comment, joke, or suggestion the other might offer. In the end, they both agreed a divorce was the only solution. There was no rancor, no bickering over the property settlement, and they went their separate ways on friendly terms.

Robert found it a relief to be living on his own. He was finally able to relax and be himself, without having to worry that a casual remark would spark a firestorm. There was a touch of sadness, though. They had once been in love, they had been deliriously happy in each other's company, and they had embarked on the grand adventure of life as the best of friends. Why did it go wrong? He looked back upon those years with a mixture of nostalgia and sadness. He had no illusions that they could ever get back together, but he missed the good times, the joy of having your best friend forever at your side. When there was a spectacular sunset, when he found a particularly good restaurant, or when the neighbor's puppy was startled by his own reflection in a hubcap, there was no one to share the moment. Robert was lonely. And so slowly, tentatively, he began to explore the dating scene.

Bars hadn't changed since he last visited one years ago. Too loud, too brazen, and too public. Robert enjoyed quiet, romantic conversations. Not screaming over the din of a deaf idiot torturing an electric guitar. Adult education didn't work for him, either. There were very few women his age in the classes he tried, and the ones he did meet were happily married. Strict prohibitions against workplace shenanigans ruled out exploratory flirtations in the office, and online dating introduced him to examples of dishonesty and depravity he never knew existed. He was about to resign himself to a life of monastic solitude when he met Cheryl. He was reading an e-book in a coffee shop while absently sipping a Dark Peruvian Roast. Cheryl asked if she could sit at his table. As he looked up he saw that every other seat in the shop was taken, and a quick glance at her showed he wouldn't have minded sharing his table with her if the place had been empty. She turned out to be as charming as she was beautiful, and the next few weeks were an exciting kaleidoscope of dinners, movies, and long walks in the park. Almost before he knew what had happened she became a frequent overnight guest.

On a lazy Saturday morning Robert was reading in bed. He set down his book, stretched, and downed the last gulp of coffee from his mug. He got up, grabbed his robe from the bedpost, and ambled into the bathroom. Cheryl had just finished taking her shower. Her body was wrapped in a thick Turkish towel while another towel was wrapped around her hair like a turban. She walked into the bedroom to get dressed as he got ready for his shower.

"Cheryl" he called after her. "Did you know you left the cap off the shampoo?"

"I don't like caps" she called back. "They just get in the way."

"But if it gets knocked over all the shampoo will spill out."

Cheryl walked back into the bathroom and gave him a seductive look. "I'll take my chances" she said. "I like to live dangerously." Then she turned on her heel and walked out.

Robert had no answer to that argument, in part because she was wearing nothing but a long T-shirt. It was just barely long enough to be decent, but the way it clung to her body left no doubt as to the curves underneath. All logical thoughts seemed to vanish from his brain.

He thought about her as he showered. How much he enjoyed her company. How much happier he was since he met her. He was still thinking about her when he opened the medicine cabinet and reached for the toothpaste.

“Cheryl” he called out. “Where’s the cap to the toothpaste?”

“I threw it away” she called back. “It was in the way.”

“But the toothpaste will spill out!” he complained.

Cheryl walked into the bathroom. “What’s with you and caps?” she asked. “Do you save the cap when you open a bottle of beer? Do you save the cap when you start a new can of hair spray? The cap is part of the packaging. You throw it away. If you don’t squeeze the tube, the toothpaste won’t leak out.”

“But it only takes a second or two to put it back on” Robert said.

“It takes two and a half seconds” Cheryl countered. “I know because I timed it. Two point five seconds to take it off, and two point five seconds to put it back on. I brush my teeth three times a day. That’s fifteen seconds a day I would waste fooling with a toothpaste cap. One hundred and five seconds a week. If I live to be ninety, which the actuarial tables say is very possible since my mother and both my grandmothers were active well into their nineties, that’s almost one hundred and forty hours. I could spend that time doing something I enjoy, or I could waste that time fiddling around with a damn toothpaste cap!” She stormed out of the room.

Robert stared after her, dumbstruck. At last he had met a kindred spirit. He was in love.