

## Some Sort of a Mistake

Tom Hansen sat in his room and tried to figure out what had gone wrong. He had the uneasy feeling that he had done something wrong, that he had made some sort of a mistake, but he didn't know what it was. He had been getting ready to take a shower when his daughter-in-law, Linda, brought him a bathrobe. She caught him by surprise. He didn't even know that Linda was visiting. Why hadn't his wife told him about that?

What really bothered him was that he could not clearly remember what had happened. This wasn't the first time his memory had failed him. Sometimes he would walk into a room and not remember why he had gone there. Sometimes he would find himself in a room and not remember how he got there. He stopped driving years ago, when he got lost and couldn't remember how to find his way home. He also "zoned out" once and drove right through a red light. Fortunately he didn't hit anyone, but the car horns and shouting from the angry drivers who slammed on their brakes to avoid hitting him convinced him it was time to stop driving. Things hadn't gotten better since then. He was afraid he was losing his mind.

His grandfather had lost his mind. He lived with Tom's parents for several years after his wife died, and his mind slowly deteriorated. At first it was almost charming. A forgotten name now and then. A crystal clear memory of things that happened fifty years previously but an inability to remember what he had eaten for breakfast. Then it got worse. He forgot to shave, forgot to bathe, and didn't know where he was. He became suspicious of everyone around him, convinced they were lying when they talked about things he didn't remember, and he thought everyone was trying to steal his money. Finally his parents took his grandfather to the old folk's home, or the "County Home for the Aged" as it was officially known. They said it was for his own good, and that he would enjoy being around people his own age, but he wasn't happy there. They used to visit him every Sunday afternoon, but the visits were strained. His grandfather complained that the people who worked there did horrible things. They broke his arm when he wouldn't do one thing, or they poked his eye out when he wouldn't do something else, but there was clearly nothing wrong with his arm or his eye. When they got ready to leave he always begged them to take him home with them. Finally he had a stroke. He lay in a bed staring at the ceiling, not talking to anyone and not aware of their visits, for the better part of a year. Then he died.

Tom was terrified of turning into his grandfather. His father had the good fortune to die of a heart attack in his 60s, but Tom seemed to be cursed with a long life. Still, he was in pretty good shape considering his age. He had a forgetful moment now and then, but he remembered all the important things and he didn't think anyone noticed his minor lapses.

A knock at his bedroom door brought him back to the present. "Come in" he called out. His son Robert entered the room.

“Robert!” he said with enthusiasm. “How nice of you to drop by.”

“How are you feeling, Dad?” Robert answered.

“I’m feeling fine” Tom said. “I just finished my morning shower and I’m relaxing in my bathrobe.”

“It’s seven o’clock at night, Dad. You said you wanted to change clothes for dinner and then you disappeared.”

“Oh.” Tom was totally bewildered by this information. “I guess maybe when I started to take my clothes off to change I got confused and thought it was time for my shower.”

“Linda came upstairs to see what was taking you so long and found you standing naked in the hallway.”

“I, I was looking for my bathrobe” Tom said, struggling to remember the details. “I didn’t know that you and Linda were visiting. Usually it’s just Emily and me in the house.”

Robert put his hand on Tom’s arm and said very gently “Mom’s been dead for five years now, Dad.”

How could he have forgotten? A flood of memories swirled through Tom’s brain. Not a coherent sequence, but a jumble of images. Visits to the hospital. A gravestone. The doctor’s diagnosis. How peaceful she looked at the funeral. All he could say was “Oh.”

“And we’re not visiting, Dad. You sold your house two years ago and moved in with us. Do you remember that?”

Tom looked at his son with tears in his eyes. “I guess I’m getting forgetful in my old age.”

“We worry about you, Dad. Linda will be going back to work soon, now that Katie’s in an all-day school, and we’re afraid you won’t be safe here by yourself.”

“I’ve managed to do OK for nearly eighty years now” Tom said.

“Yes you have, Dad. But you’re not as strong as you used to be. What if you fell and broke your hip when there was no one here to call an ambulance?”

“Do you think I need one of those things you wear around your neck to call for help?” Tom asked.

“And you’re getting forgetful” Robert added. “What if it had been Katie who saw you naked in the hallway?”

“Oh.” Tom had no answer for that. The thought of frightening his little granddaughter was more than he could bear. He sat in silence for a long time before he got the courage to ask the next question. “Do you think I need to move into the old folk’s home?”

“No,” Tom said reassuringly. “They closed the old folk’s home years ago. Before I was even born. I do think, though, that you might want to think about moving into an assisted living facility. There are some very nice ones near here. You’d have your own room, they serve home cooked meals in the dining room, and there are people available to provide help if you need it, twenty-four hours a day. There would be lots of people your own age to talk to, and of course we would come visit you all the time.”

“I see” said Tom. But what he saw wasn’t what Robert was describing. It sounded a lot like the old folk’s home to him. “But what about my things?” He swept his hand toward the books, photographs, and other detritus of a lifetime that filled the room.

“I’m sure we could find space for those things in your new room” Robert answered. “We don’t have to do anything right away, but promise me you’ll think about it. OK?”

“OK” Tom replied sadly. Indeed, that was all he could think about for the rest of the evening. He was still thinking about it when he went to bed that night. He didn’t want to move. He liked living here. He didn’t blame John and Linda for worrying about him, but today had just been a bad day. Usually he wasn’t nearly so forgetful. Maybe this was all just a misunderstanding. Some sort of a mistake. This was the type of problem that Emily had always been good at. She handled the people issues. He took care of the cars, the plumbing, and the appliances that quit working. She took care of salesmen, neighbors, and crying children. They used to joke that he handled the leaky faucets and she handled the leaky kids. He relaxed when he thought about Emily, and how good she was at this sort of thing. “Emily will know what to do,” he said to himself as he drifted off to sleep. “There’s no point in my worrying about it. Emily will take care of it.”