

Survivor

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

Another Thursday night.

She usually looked forward to sharing the next hour with her husband, but tonight she felt weary. Leaning on the table, she pushed away the half-eaten Stouffer's lasagna and pulled herself up. Wavering over her walker, she adjusted the dial on the portable oxygen tank to highest flow.

The walk across the kitchen seemed interminable. She paused at the counter and gathered the supplies. The cans rattled against the metal basket. At the living room entrance, she rested again. The carpet slowed her down; it always did. She adjusted her nasal cannula. After a few breaths, she shambled the last steps to the Lazy Boy.

Her husband's white hair always shocked her; once, it had been jet black. But she loved the feel of it now, spun silver soft as the Lamb's Ear edging the front walk. He slumped in the chair, washrag pressed against the side of his face where the tumor had eaten into his jaw. A good man, an obliging patient, his tee shirt was already rolled up to his chest.

"Dinner time." She tried to sound chipper.

He nodded his head, but didn't look at her.

The tubing unwound in her hands, unreeling like a garden hose. She leaned over him, feeling precarious without the walker. Her hand trembled against the warmth of his stomach, shrunken so that the skin folded in canyons. This time she managed to slip the tubing end into the port on the first try. It wasn't always that easy. Tears welled.

She wheezed and gripped the side of the recliner to catch her breath. She shook one can, then the next, struggling with the pop-tops. Arthritis crippled the fingers that once quilted and knitted, that wrung weeds from the earth and turned patients in their hospital beds. She despised her weakness.

He grunted.

“Oh. What's for dinner tonight?” A new part of the ritual she kept forgetting. “Tonight we have meatloaf with lots of catsup, mashed potatoes dripping with butter, and, of course, peas. The petite LeSuer ones you love. For dessert, Boston cream pie. Your favorite.”

He managed a weak smile.

She hung the bag from the IV pole and slowly poured in one can. Liquid the consistency and color of gravy slowly edged down the clear tube. She smiled at him as she sank to the couch and waited for gravity to pull sustenance into his frail body. He watched, too, his eyes anxious on the bag.

She wondered whether the artificial nutrition had any flavor, whether he could somehow taste it through his blood. Whether it satisfied. To her, the liquid smelled the way chalk tasted. She thought of the meals they had shared the past 49 years: the duck confit and profiteroles in Paris, the smorgasboard of salmon and herring and cheeses enjoyed in Helsinki during their second honeymoon, their daughters and grandchildren gathered around the Thanksgiving table. The goblets of wine, the morning coffees. Thursday night pizza, popcorn, and television. All those years.

“Honey, do you remember when we—”

He gurgled something that sounded like “shush.”

She bit her lip, averting her gaze to the floor. Her mouth flooded with a metallic wetness.

He looked past her, to the wide-screen. Buff young bodies dove into crystalline water in an exotic country she would never visit. Jeff Probst's voice filled the room. "Last week, on Survivor..." She looked again at the mud-colored liquid flowing into the hole in her husband's stomach and wondered how many more Thursdays they had left. She patted his knee.

"I love you."

He grunted back, eyes glued to the tube. But he released the remote, circled her trembling fingers, and squeezed them tight.

