

Best-Case Scenario

by Vincent Rupp

“I don’t ever want to get old and weak!”

Two runners had joined the path at the end of the park, four blocks away. They were at the playground now, close enough for words to drift to Richard’s patio on the insistent wind that was showering the first leaves out of the trees. The speaker was a young man who was now doing pull-ups; a young woman was waiting for him impatiently.

The path continued around the park and exited by his house. When the young man ran by, he’d see Richard on the patio and their eyes would meet. Richard would smile and give him a nod. Embarrassed, the young man would look away quickly and keep his eyes fixed ahead with false casualness.

The phone rang inside. It’d be his daughter, calling after church with the usual disappointment that he hadn’t found religion this week. If he hurried, he could get it before the machine. This week though, he felt tired. He turned his head, waiting for the message. His gaze fell on the extension cord he’d forgotten to put away the day before. He used to trim the bushes by hand, but nowadays the electric trimmer was easier.

“Today’s sermon was really great. It was about forgiveness, and I just know you would have liked it.” Susan and her husband had been at it for over a decade. Lately they were trying the soft sell. Maybe if they’d started with that.

The cord was easy to overlook now, but when new it had been bright orange. The pigments giving it color were large organic molecules, embedded in the rubber. They were stable, designed to last, but every now and then, a tiny photon on a nuclear-powered journey from the sun hit just right and the carefully-manufactured orange faded just a hair.

“Anyway, we’re thinking about bringing the kids to the park later, maybe we could have a barbeque on your deck? One last summer celebration!”

She worried about him, body and soul. In the morning, the kids would go back to school, but for the first time in fifty years, he wouldn’t. He wondered where he’d be instead.

He looked at the playground again. The young man was trying to manage sit-ups on the slide, and the young woman was still on the path, now with her arms crossed. "Can we go?" she asked. How young were they? Maybe if he were their age he could tell from this distance.

Pretty young though, for him to say something like that. He wouldn't say that if he was old enough to notice the occasional knee ache was part of a trend, to finally spot the shift in a hairline, or to need the handrail on a staircase. Yeah, they were young. Probably not even thirty.

Thirty. The number seemed important. What year was it? He took a deep breath; this winter would be thirty years.

Everyone told him it wasn't fair, like he didn't already know. Looking back now though, he figured he shouldn't complain. Even though her brother had implanted wrong, rendering her perpetually an only child, Susan had always been healthy. And they had fifteen years with her before Carol found what else had been growing inside her.

Still, some days seemed less fair than others, like those when they found they hadn't beaten the odds. The leaves were falling then too when the doctor finished flipping through the folder and gave them a serious look. Richard took Carol's hand, held in the space between their chairs. "The good news is the surgery went very well." They waited, breathless, for the bottom line. Did he think the good news would relax them? "But it has spread. If we start chemo right away, there's a good chance..."

Richard squeezed her hand, as he would at every subsequent glimmer and maybe. She looked over at him, wanting the reassurance of their connection. He focused on the doctor, listening carefully to every word. If he looked at her, she'd see the fear he'd been fighting down; he couldn't risk seeing the same in her.

At the playground, the young man started running again. Maybe feeling petulant, the young woman was now stretching on the grass by the chain-link fence. Her body would be firm and healthy, full of life. She was probably too young to appreciate that. The young man stopped and turned around. "Are you coming?" Richard imagined she said she had waited for him. Tit for tat, the hallmark of a good relationship.

Before the cancer, he and Carol always had a good relationship. They could talk things over and laugh the little things off. But there he was, just two days after she was admitted, walking in near seven o'clock. He opened the door to see her laughing with Susan.

"Hi, dad!"

"Hi, sweetie. You been here long?" He knew the answer; she'd come right after school the previous day too.

"Hi Richard, good to see you."

He was sure she saw his hesitation, just a fraction of a second, before he said "Good to see you too." Processes that began forty years ago brought Carol into adult- and mother-hood, made her muscles strong and kept her skin supple. Forty years of beauty, dissolved in under two months, like a sugar cube in cold water. "Sorry it's so late. It's been hectic at school this year, and I probably told you I'm covering chemistry part-time too."

At the sight of her now, he squinted away the tears and looked around the room. She didn't need that from him; she needed him to be there for her, to support her and make sure she knew she was loved. But nothing he tried could get past the sight of her so thin and sick, and he just ended up crying, making a mess of everything. He fixed his gaze on the TV, but Susan had already turned it off.

"That's okay. Are those for me?" Carol's manner invited him in, asked him to share his pain as they'd done all these years. She'd hold him and tell him it was okay, but it wasn't. She was the sick one, and Susan was still a child. He was the head of the family; he was supposed to take care of them.

"Yeah. Your favorite." He moved Susan's textbooks out of the way and sat down on the bed. He kissed her sharp cheekbone and took her hand in both of his. He'd stopped at three florists on the way. Even from the road, the first two had appeared closed, but visiting hours went until eight, so he'd checked anyway. Ashamed, he muttered to the bedspread "I'm glad you're studying."

The young couple was bickering now. Richard cocked his head, listening. The branches of dry leaves rustled with the wind and brought the young man saying "You always do this!" Her reply started with "That's because you never", and the breeze kept the rest. Always and never: their problems were serious. He closed his eyes and imagined their angry words and recriminations, rising and falling with their breathing, still hard from the exertion of running

Every year, Richard had his students measure their lung volume and then estimate how many molecules of oxygen they inhaled with every breath. It's an incomprehensible number. He diagramed how it entered their blood, deformed the hemoglobin that picked it up, and spread to an unfathomable number of cells. There were so many tiny things, all conspiring together so exactly every second simply so they could take another breath.

He'd never wasted such perfection arguing in the park. Well, not this park. The one at the school though, near the end of that term. Richard shouted that he didn't need to take time off; what he needed was to keep working, needed something to occupy his mind. He panicked at the thought that if he wasn't at work, there was only one place he could be.

He'd forced himself to calm down. Then he apologized and promised to be more attentive. It's only two weeks left, Richard pleaded. The superintendent looked around; the students were all gone, no one had seen. In the end, Richard had pulled it together; the night before that had just been hard.

The mood had been different at the hospital. Carol told him what she'd decided. She hadn't used him to talk it over first. He'd really looked at her then, searching her face, trying to understand without asking. "How long would you be there?" He didn't really know, or want to know, what hospice care meant.

She reached toward him, her smile sad, becoming a grimace from the effort. "Probably not very long." Richard shook his head and pulled her close, anything to keep from looking at this wilted parody of the woman he loved, to keep himself from shuddering with the uselessness she didn't need to see. But being pressed so closely, he felt his hands over her bony ribs over her struggle to breathe and sobbed into her, unable to either hold it back or pull away.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you forever. No matter what." She said she knew and she loved him too. She tapped her wedding ring on his back. Without counting, he knew it'd be eighteen times. From how loose it was, he knew there'd never come a nineteenth.

The young couple's fight seemed to be ending, but without apology or affection. Richard wished one of them would stop, realize how inconsequential this episode was, and say how much they cared. Then they'd share a hug and a laugh, thereby excising the anger from their hearts. Instead, they'd added to it, spreading more hurt through their history so it could keep growing. Unchecked, their relationship would be terminal.

He and Carol had just that one moment of communion; this young couple would disappear from each other's lives without even that.

Inside the house, the phone rang again. Four long rings, then the machine. "Hey, it's me again. Scott seems to think last time we were there you were low on propane. We can bring our spare tank if so, just let me know."

This call was about propane, but it could have been about anything. Some calls though, the kind you get deep in the night, you know what those are about and still can't prepare for them.

He had trouble waking up, couldn't find his keys, didn't know what to wear. He dressed himself in his suit, the one she always said he looked so nice in. But what to do about Susan? She shouldn't be there for this. She'd be angry if he didn't tell her. If he told her, he couldn't stop her from going. He was about to knock on her door but then changed his mind and went to the car. He sat there for a few minutes with the key in the ignition, then went back inside to wake her.

"Just park in the handicapped spot!" she commanded. It's probably too late, he thought. She rushed inside with him following closely, to Carol's private room with the soothing green walls. In this place, there was no hum or whirr of machines, just a single tube to her arm. She was propped up, eyes closed but breathing. She'd waited for them. Could she sense he wished she hadn't? He tried to smile through the tragedy of all she was losing and cursed himself that she'd probably thought she lost him too.

Susan, really still Susie back then, went to her, overwhelmed with grief but somehow still functioning. She took her mom's hands and calmly, though through tears, told her she was beautiful. Richard kissed her forehead, stroked her cheek, and felt like an intruder when he joined his hands with theirs. He said he was sorry it took them so long, and choked out that he loved her.

Her sunken eyes – he'd once told her by the side of the Seine that they out-sparkled the river – moved with difficulty between them, then focused on Susan. They both leaned closer, but there were no last words. Carol smiled, closed her eyes, exhaled, and with that, for Richard, it was the premature extinguishing of the sun. All the warmth suddenly vanished; the world went dark.

He collapsed in a chair, his head in his hands, shaking for the loss of his wife and the infinite regret of having abandoned her when she needed him most.

The young couple resumed their run, toward the house. The young man made a comment about the leaves crunching under their feet, trying to reestablish normalcy over the feelings beneath. Overnight, it would rain, dulling the burnt orange leaves, turning them to mush. By next spring they'd be gone, rejoined with the dirt. It happens to everything, someday. The lucky ones were those who saw more of it.

As the couple neared the house, Richard sighed. The young man heard him and turned with surprise. Embarrassed that his argument had been seen, the young man looked away quickly, but not before they shared a look. In that moment, Richard thought, the young man realized there are worse things than getting old, and worse ways to be weak.