

Changing Course

Ray took another critical look at his handiwork. He'd been sanding the bookcase shelves for close to thirty minutes and estimated they would need at least another hour's worth of attention. His mother had cautioned him against getting too messy right before he ventured out to the workshop, and the thin layer of dust covering him now would not please her.

The building of the bookcase, and many other house projects, began soon after he arrived back in his Missouri hometown. His father's illness had progressed to the point that he could no longer handle the maintenance which this old farmhouse required, and Ray's mother would not hear of placing her husband in a care facility insisting that his dad would get the care he needed at home. Being their only child, Ray decided to take an early retirement from his job as a librarian in Austin and spend some time back home to help with house repairs and assess his parents' situation.

That was seven months ago.

The realization that this move back home might be a permanent one was now more apparent. He had brought only the essentials with him: a sparse wardrobe and a multitude of books. The clothes easily fit into the tiny closet of his boyhood room, but the numerous books necessitated an extra case as most of the shelves in his parents' house were occupied with momentos accumulated over their 60 years together. The course of their marriage had run smoothly and predictably, as had his life, until his father's illness. Now each day brought only the unknown.

He placed the shelf in the bookcase and started sanding another. He laughed to himself thinking about his mother's request for him to stay presentable. She told him it was because his father's therapist was soon to arrive for a session.

"You should watch how she works with your father so we can both help him on the days she doesn't come," his mother said.

That sounded like a valid explanation, but he knew his mother's other motives. Meredith Marquez was the new therapist assigned to his father, and she had been making home visits twice a week for the past month. During their first meeting with her, she told them what his father's routine would be, the strategies she practiced, and what they could expect in terms of the progression of the disease. Her credentials were impressive, and the enthusiasm and vigor she exhibited belied her years.

Ray appreciated the honest way in which Meredith informed them of his father's progress and how she awarded Ben Harrison the dignity that was quickly eluding him. But in addition to the therapist's obvious skills, his mother held interest in another fact. Meredith Marquez was a single professional woman in this town where not many single professional people ventured to settle unless family ties pulled them, as in his case. His mother's unwillingness to consign her sexagenarian son to the bachelorhood he embraced paralleled her reluctance to have him return home to assist in the care of his father. They were Ray's choices to make; however, and he gave no indication of feeling any regret.

It didn't seem that ninety minutes had passed when Meredith came into the workshop.

“Well, your father clobbered me at arm-wrestling again,” she said. “He’s taking a quick nap while your mother prepares lunch, which she instructed me to tell you will be ready soon.”

“I’m almost done here,” Ray replied.

“This is a very nice piece of furniture, Ray,” she said inspecting the bookcase. “Is it your creation?”

“I did give birth to it, yes,” he answered.

“Then you’re a **case** for the medical books,” she said with a smile. “No pun intended.”

Ray grinned. He could see why his father was so relaxed with Meredith. Her humor came easily.

“It’s rare to find someone who can handcraft furniture like this anymore,” Meredith observed.

“This is hardly fine craftsmanship,” he told her deflecting the compliment, “but it will serve its purpose.” He was notoriously hesitant to accept recognition of any kind. It wasn’t feigned humility but genuine discomfort.

“How fortunate that you had a father who could teach you this skill. The passing of knowledge like this, from father to son, is a rarity now. What a gift he gave you.”

Ray continued sanding. He felt an awkwardness that he was unaccustomed to.

Meredith took a serious tone, “If I may, I’d like to speak candidly with you, Ray.”

“Of course,” he said looking at her directly now.

She continued. “I’m not a doctor, Ray, but I’ve had a wide-range of experience working with many patients like your father. Yes, he’s in the early stages of Alzheimer’s, and he is strong and determined. But the disease will progress. As it does, the toll on you and your mother will become substantial. Most of the time, there is only the spouse to deal with it. Whether you’re willing to accept it or not, you are a godsend to her, and you will play an integral part in how your father lives out his remaining time.”

Ray looked contemplative but remained silent. He began putting away various tools.

Meredith watched him carefully.

“All I’m saying, Ray, is that your father is a proud man, and he raised a proud son. My father was in a similar state when I came back from my service in the Peace Corps, and the responsibility of his care fell to my mother and me. My brother couldn’t handle it. He couldn’t handle the fact that our father needed assistance with the mundane things we take for granted like eating a meal or blowing his nose. The frustration your father is feeling is inherently part of this disease, but it is also due to the fact that he senses you get frustrated with him. And it’s even more acute because of the self-sufficiency on which he has always prided himself.”

Thinking that she had gone too far, Meredith grew silent fearing she had crossed that fine line between physical therapy and family counseling. She did not want to venture where she was not wanted, but this family had become particularly important to her, so she dared to be bold.

Ray finally interrupted the gulf of silence that hung in the air and quietly said, “Tell me how I can help him.”

Meredith exhaled slowly. “Be the son you’ve always been to him, Ray. Talk to him about the economy or sports. Take him to a baseball game now and then. You know, he’s told me how much the two of you used to enjoy attending games.”

“That was back when I was on the field, and he was in the stands.”

“Then that puts you in an even better position because you can share it from the same perspective. Recall with him those times from your childhood. That’s good. He won’t be able to do that much longer, you know.”

She briefly paused.

“Your relationship will change, but in the process you’ll develop a new level of compassion and an intimacy with your father that many children never reach with their parents. It’s an opportunity that’s yours for the taking.”

Ray looked past her at the unfinished bookcase.

“Is it okay for him to handle tools?” he asked.

“Well,” she answered with a subdued smile, “I wouldn’t let him use a table saw, but with your guidance, he could complete some simple woodworking projects. For him to feel useful and create something tangible with his son, that would work wonders.”

Ray let out a sigh. “I anticipate needing a sturdier bed frame seeing as my girth has changed over the last 50 years. We could start with that.”

Meredith grinned, “If you build it, he will come.” And she gazed at a man that had taken on a new role right before her eyes.

Over the course of the next two years, Ray devoted more time to his father and engaged in the kind of activities that any father and son might pursue. They watched college football on television and discussed current events, as best they could. They completed the bed frame for Ray and a potting stand for his mother’s herbs. They even drove to St. Louis to take in a Cardinals’ game, something they had done only once before when Ray graduated from high school.

Meredith had been right. The time they spent together was a revelation both in the closeness he and his dad could share and the strength Benjamin Harrison exhibited to the end. When death loomed near, there was the assurance that what needed to be said **had** been said, and their last days together passed in reverent peace.

For Ray, life had not played out the way he had anticipated it would. Steady, unchanging, predictable, those were the words that defined him in the past, and he had settled into that comfortable existence. But after his father died, the changes came almost without effort. His mother developed close friendships with the other widows in town and began volunteering once a week as a Newborn Cuddler in the NICU unit of the county hospital. He sold his house in Austin and found a part-time job at the small library in town. And to the surprise of no one more than himself, he had fallen in love.

Meredith and he married in the spring following his father’s death, and they settled into a home not far from the baseball fields he frequented as a boy. His life had now become **their** life, and a new definition of it emerged...the definition of **bliss**.

Yes, his course had indeed changed and taken him on an entirely new and unexpected route. And he found the scenery beautiful.