

The first chapter of **EXIT - A novel about dying** by Jo Kline Cebuhar
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Lois

Ray Spaulding made the coffee, collected the morning newspaper and placed them both on a breakfast tray along with buttered toast, two slices of crisp bacon and a peeled orange. He'd done the same thing every weekday for something like forty-two years, and he couldn't see why he should chuck the ritual just because his wife Lois was now living at Rockaway House.

The breakfast custom was a holdover from their working years—Ray spent his career as editor of *The Chesterton Bee* and Lois as the office manager of an accounting firm. Back then, while she enjoyed breakfast, he read aloud the highlights of the newspaper. Sometimes Ray asked Lois for her opinion on a story or a headline and she was always glad to offer constructive criticism. Later, while he showered, she dressed and fixed him a go-cup of coffee. Ray had a donut with his coworkers once he got to *The Bee*.

Lois and Ray's morning routine had always had a logic and rhythm all its own.

When daughter Carlene came along five years into the marriage, grabbing extra minutes in bed to bank even a small portion of extra sleep was a tempting option. Carlene was a difficult baby. Lois told Ray he didn't need to keep bringing breakfast to her, but Ray didn't see it that way. "On the contrary," he said, "let's have this time to ourselves, Lois, before that little stinker wakes up."

As Carlene got older, Lois and Ray's schedule expanded and conformed to include the high drama that inevitably ensued each day in getting Carlene off to school. Carlene was a difficult young child. But Ray wouldn't hear of foregoing their breakfast habit, saying, "Now, more than ever, Lois, we need this bit of time together. I just don't want to give it up. Unless you do?"

Lois always laughed and said, "Not me!"

Over the years, Carlene never once intruded on Lois and Ray's special time alone. In fact, Carlene didn't stir until Lois had eaten, the dishes were cleared and both Lois and Ray had begged her at least three times to please, for the love of God, get up. Carlene was a difficult teenager. With her, breakfast was a grueling ordeal as her food preferences changed without warning, followed by the daily wardrobe kerfuffle. Nothing was ever easy with Carlene.

An unintended bonus of his daughter's everlasting petulance was that Ray, seemingly unable to shed his role as editor, developed the amusing habit of putting the lid on most situations with a fitting headline. For example: **Hurricane Carlene Wreaks Havoc On Spaulding Household**. Ray whispered his pithy captions to Lois once Carlene had stormed through the room/from the car/out the door. Over the years, Carlene was seemingly ignorant of these humorous sidebars along with her parents' private breakfasts. From time to time, Lois and Ray thought perhaps they relished their little secrets a bit more than they should.

Six months before her high school graduation, it came as no big surprise when Carlene announced she would be going to college in California, literally the furthest she could get from home without plummeting into the ocean. Lois and Ray weren't anxious for her to move so far away, but they wanted Carlene to have the life of her choosing. It was exactly why they had so judiciously saved for her higher education, and they accepted the news with their customary encouragement and resignation. They wanted what Carlene wanted. So there you go. **Daughter Announces Trans-continental Relocation**

Once Carlene earned her degree as an herbalist—or was she a herbologist, Lois and Ray could never quite remember—she stayed in California to pursue her career. The target market for

Carlene's herbology salon, *Au Naturale!*, was in Larkfield-Wikiup, California, not Chesterton, Iowa. Everyone agreed; it only made sense.

As far as Lois and Ray could tell, Carlene's clientele was fiercely loyal and had an abundance of discretionary funds for herbal cures of everything from acne to irritable bowel syndrome. Carlene's shop was in a trendy neighborhood where the locals believed the planets had surely aligned themselves for a person of Carlene's expertise and wisdom to be dropped into their midst. **Finely Aged California Whine** Carlene lived above the shop in an apartment furnished with what she called "mid-century modern" and what Ray referred to as "you know, that stuff we grew up with."

Over the years, family communications and get-togethers were predictable even if infrequent. Cards and calls were dutifully sent and made on birthdays, Mother's Day and Father's Day, and Carlene always spent the obligatory Christmas season in Chesterton—well, except for this past year—using the funds that Ray inevitably sent for her plane ticket without Carlene even having to ask. Lois and Ray visited California just once. The fold-out couch in Carlene's living room left a semi-permanent dent in Ray's back and the strict vegan offerings—unless Ray suggested they dine out, his treat—left both Lois and Ray in bad sorts for days after their return. Ray and Lois talked about it afterwards and they were sure that from then on, Carlene would prefer to spend their time together in familiar surroundings, in Chesterton.

The months turned into years and then into more years.

When Ray approached age sixty-five, he and Lois considered the timing of his retirement, keeping in mind that he wanted to leave at the top of his game.

At breakfast one morning Ray said, "Honey, you know the paper's ripe for a buyout at any time. And when that happens, they'll do what they always do in these situations, they'll pick off the old and weak from the herd. That would be me. I'd rather go out on my own terms."

Lois didn't disagree. Their nephew Byron had been in charge of their investments for years and had done very well by Lois and Ray. They were financially secure and they had their health. Why not get started on living out those golden years of retirement they'd heard so much about?

The Assistant Editor Jake Elbert, just two years out of journalism school, was named as Ray's successor and on July 1, 2002, *The Bee* staff had a small going away party in Ray's honor. Lois and Ray departed the next morning for a ten-day cruise to Alaska. It had been their dream since Carlene left for college and the trip was all they hoped it would be.

Life in retirement was agreeable in its consistency for Lois and Ray. Each day still began with breakfast in bed for Lois, except Ray was no longer hurrying off to work. He doubled up on the toast and bacon and picked at the communal plate as they read *The Bee* together.

Lois was still his number one fan.

"Is it my imagination or is this newspaper just not as good as it used to be?" Ray frequently observed.

Lois agreed. "No, it is not your imagination. You were a darn good editor, Ray Spaulding, the best that paper ever had."

Ray sat on the edge of the bed and smiled at his bride of over four decades. **"Beautiful Ingénue Falls For Newspaper Nerd."**

"True, but you were still the best," Lois said.

Most days Lois and Ray took their time getting dressed and then headed out for errands or the day's activities. They maintained the unhurried pace of two people who had earned the right to take their own sweet time.

On the morning of January 10, 2011, Lois was still dozing when Ray brought the breakfast tray.

"Hey, there—breakfast is served."

Lois slowly opened her eyes and looked up at Ray. Even before she spoke, Ray knew they had a problem.

"Honey, I don't feel right. I must have a bug or something. My back aches—I ache all over." Ray didn't say what he was thinking. His wife's color did not look good.

Five days later, Lois and Ray found themselves sitting in front of a massive desk, with Dr. Randall Sims at a safe distance on the other side. After forty-eight hours in the Chesterton Medical Center, countless tests and a round of antibiotics, Lois had taken it easy at home for three days. She was convinced that whatever had caused her unscheduled trip to the doctor and on to the hospital had run its course. She was almost positive she felt better now.

The doctor asked if Lois had noticed being confused or having trouble concentrating. Lois and Ray looked at each other, laughed nervously and she said, yes, but they thought they were just having "senior moments." Dr. Sims flashed a fleeting smile and said that in Lois's case, it was more likely caused by *the disease*. Ray cringed. When Dr. Sims read a list of symptoms, Lois nodded to every one: decreased appetite, trouble sleeping, some swelling in her ankles, puffy eyes, backache.

What was Carlene pontificating about that time they were in California? "See it and be it." (She was fresh from a workshop on the Law of Attraction.) Lois concentrated on imagining healthy cells and looking and feeling hopeful while she answered the litany of questions. The Law of Attraction thing wasn't working. As the doctor continued, her hope turned into frustration, then anxiety.

Meanwhile, Ray was a get-to-the-point kind of guy, everybody said so. He couldn't take it any longer. "So what's all this mean, doctor?" he asked.

Dr. Sims removed his glasses—never a good sign—and placed both palms flat on the desk before him. Another bad sign.

"Mrs. Spaulding, do you have any history of kidney disease in your family?"

Ray's heart sank.

"Well, I can't really say, Dr. Sims—and please call me Lois. I was adopted and I don't know much about my birth parents. You see, back then we didn't have all the open records in an adoption like they do now." For some reason, Lois felt compelled to explain to Dr. Sims the cultural context for being so shamefully ignorant of her own family's health history. When she thought about it later, she thought that was probably because to her—and Ray had agreed—Dr. Sims looked like he was maybe nineteen years old.

"I see. In any case, Mrs. Spaulding, you have polycystic kidney disease. You have cysts in your kidneys and the damage is extensive. I'll get you scheduled with the dialysis clinic here at Chesterton Medical Center." Dr. Sims reached to pick up his phone. Ray calmly, deliberately and firmly placed his hand on top of the doctor's. Dr. Sims's head shot up. Ray paused a moment before speaking, his gaze locked on Dr. Sims.

"Young man," Ray said, "I don't know how much time your medical school professors spent talking about bedside manners, but it wasn't enough. You just told my wife and me that she has what I will assume is a life-threatening disease, so before you pass us off to the next expert, you need to explain just exactly what you know and what it means for us."

At that moment, Lois couldn't say if she was more shocked by the doctor's words or Ray's, but she did know that she had never been more grateful to have Ray Spaulding on her team. She couldn't speak.

Ray lifted his hand and the doctor slowly pulled his away, looking not quite sure how to proceed. "I come from a newspaper background, doctor. I'll make it very easy for you. We need to know who, what, why, when, where and how." Ray gave Lois's hand a reassuring squeeze. His grip was dry and warm. Lois took a breath and her heart stopped beating quite so fast.

Dr. Sims briefly considered Ray's words and then gave Lois and Ray the facts. He said, although he couldn't be positive, that Lois had probably inherited this disease. Her blood pressure was dangerously high and they would continue to address that with medication. A severe kidney infection had caused the back pain and was handled for the time being as well, but Lois needed to

start dialysis straight away, three days a week to begin with, until they could evaluate how her body tolerated the treatments. As Ray later recounted this scene to his coffee buddies—using an expression Ray would normally never use—he said the doctor looked about as comfortable as a hooker in church.

Ray managed to keep his wits about him. He knew someone at *The Bee* who had a neighbor who had a sister who'd gotten a kidney transplant. Was that an option? Dr. Sims said Lois was most likely not a good candidate because of the hypertension and possible cardiac damage common with end-stage kidney disease. But—and Lois thought the doctor's manner softened a bit as he said this—he would schedule her for a comprehensive heart panel, just to make sure. Ray let the term "end-stage" pass without asking for further clarification, hoping Lois hadn't caught it at all.

Lois and Ray left the Chesterton Medical Center hand-in-hand, with a fistful of prescriptions and brochures and a reminder card for the first appointment at the dialysis center, two days later. As if Lois would forget.

On the way home, Ray finally remembered the one question he'd forgotten to ask Dr. Sims: *How long does my wife have?*

He could only hope that Lois would never remember.