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Bruno and Alice



*A love story in twelve parts
about seniors and safety*

Canada

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—Public Health Agency of Canada

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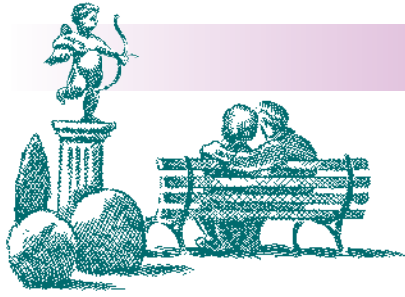
Foreword

Injuries are responsible for the discomfort, hospitalization, disabilities, institutionalization, and even death of many Canadians in their senior years. A great number of these injuries are preventable and measures to prevent them should be the concern of health practitioners, governments and communities everywhere.

This series of twelve illustrated stories follows the whimsical romance of two active seniors who, through lack of prevention, end up in awkward situations and almost miss their rendez-vous with love. The stories offer insight into some of the *personal* preventive measures seniors can take to make their environment safer and prevent injuries.

The series was produced to promote a greater awareness of the issue of injury prevention for seniors. The text, with illustrations, can be reproduced (if proper credit is given) as a series or as a whole by any organization, newspaper or other publication wishing to foster seniors' injury prevention.





Episode One

Running to get behind

Before Canada went metric, we used to say that an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure. Now we figure that fifty grams of prevention is worth about half a kilo of cure. The poetry has suffered but the point is still valid, and I was reminded of that one hot day last summer.

Since my wife passed away eight years ago, I have made a habit of walking to the statue garden of a local gallery, relaxing on one particular bench off the beaten path, reading the paper in peace. In July, a woman I didn't know began sitting on the same bench every day to read.

Hardly a word passed between us but, over time, I began to get the impression that she was there to see me. Her possible interest made me think about her differently. I found myself making sure I was at the garden at exactly the same time every day. Right through August I never missed. Nor did she. Pretty soon, I was thinking a whole lot more about her than about the daily news. I figured I'd ask her out.

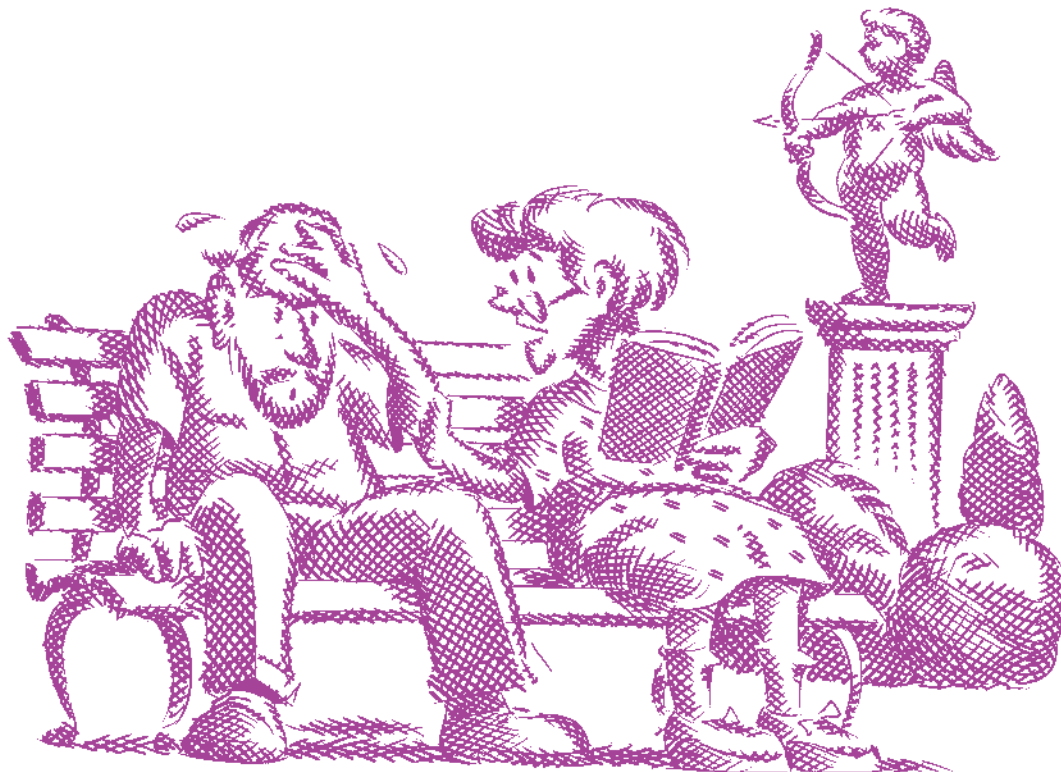
I had been out of the dating scene for a while—fifty years or so—and it took a bit of doing for me to muster the courage to ask her out dancing. There's a spot not too far from my place where they still bring in a dance band once a month. I decided to ask her to come dancing with me the following Saturday night.

But I kept putting it off. Friday rolled around and I still hadn't thought of a good line to open the conversation. Nervous, I cut the lawn, cleaned the kitchen, then swept the garage to keep myself busy. In fact, I distracted myself so well that, the first time I looked at the clock, I saw that I was nearly an hour late! She might be gone! I ran out of the house, leaving my wallet, sunglasses, hearing aid and newspaper on the hall table. Hoping she hadn't left yet, I ran most of the way to the gallery.

Now I keep pretty active, but it had been quite a while since I pushed myself this hard. And the day was hot—a real scorcher. The sun beat down on me and, by the time I arrived, I was wiped. In fact, I was really in trouble. Fortunately (actually *unfortunately*), she was still there when I arrived. I dropped down onto the bench exhausted, heaving and gasping for breath. I hadn't yet learned the great secret of aging—keep active but pace yourself. I was fried.

She leaned over, probably to ask me if I was okay, but I never heard a word she said; my hearing aid was back in the house with my cash and shades! I muttered that I was fine and, to hide the truth (that I couldn't hear her at all) I waved her off as though I wanted to be alone.

And alone is exactly how I spent Saturday evening. The big first date would have to wait.





Episode Two

One woman's poison

As a rule of thumb, if you're attracted to a man and want him to take an interest in you, you should try not to poison his descendants.

I learned that lesson last summer, when a gentleman who lived in the neighbourhood strolled by my apartment building with his two great grandchildren in tow. This man was no stranger—we had often shared a bench down at the statue garden but had never spoken. In fact, the last time I had seen him, I had asked after his health and was brushed off like I had asked for spare change.

But here he was in front of my ground-floor apartment with two beautiful little ones, and I thought I'd take another shot at showing him that I was interested. I waved hello and asked

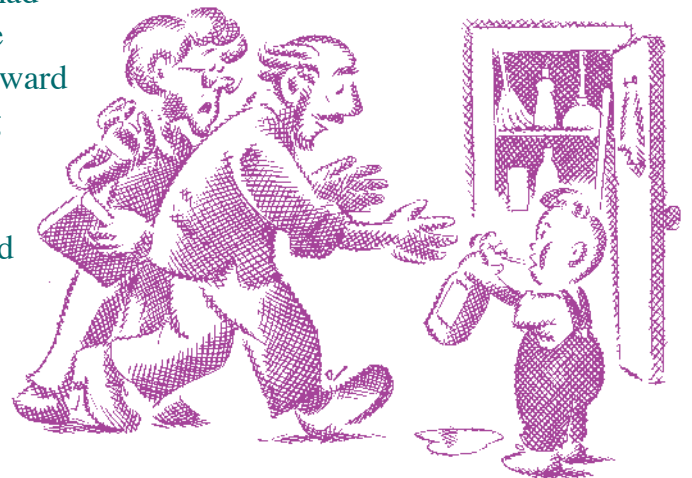
him if the toddlers might like a cool drink. He accepted and approached, introducing himself at last. His name was Bruno.

I sat the little ones at the kitchen table with some juice and, as they were drinking, Bruno wandered into the living room. He was impressed by my wall of bookcases and, before long, we were pulling out one volume after another, talking about literature, art and music. We had many similar interests.

Then, all of a sudden, Bruno was struck by the silence in the kitchen, and ducked back around the corner to make sure the toddlers were okay. I followed him in just as the younger child, standing before the open cupboard under the sink, raised a squirt bottle of liquid cleanser to his lips.

It was awful. The child was unharmed, but could easily have been in real danger. I felt terrible, and sputtered something about being older and having to keep all the cleaning supplies within easy reach. It had never occurred to me, at 80 years of age, to childproof my own home!

Nothing terrible had happened, but the incident was awkward and embarrassing and, when he left with the children, I was sure I would never see him again...





Episode Three

See you next fall

In the late summer of last year, I met a man named Bruno and began to think that something might come of it. I could tell from the way he treated his great-grandchildren that he was both kind and patient.

But you know men. No matter how “visible” I tried to make myself through summer and into the fall, he never caught on that I was interested. I’m not shy, so I decided to ask him out myself. I live in a seniors’ apartment not far from his house, and our Friday card nights are pretty wild affairs, so one week I asked him to be my guest. He accepted.

I prepared for my date with a long hot bath. Reading for hours while soaking in bath oil has always been one of life’s little pleasures—at least since the day I learned to read. When I was ready to get out, I stood up and

reached for the towel on the rack opposite the tub. It was just a little too far away.

My feet shot out from under me and I crashed down onto the tub ledge, landing with all my weight on my hip, then falling right out onto the bathroom floor. I was in agony and for the longest time couldn’t find the energy to move at all. I was afraid I’d broken something, and wondered who would find me naked on the bathroom floor when I failed to pay my rent next month!

I struggled to reach the cordless phone I always bring into the bathroom (not just for safety—I hate to miss a call). I managed, and phoned Mrs. Lun next door. We keep each other’s keys... just in case. She came right in and helped me out. She also brought over a rubber bath mat and told me who could install a grab bar near the tub.

I was okay, nothing was actually broken—just bruised. But I can tell you, I sure wasn’t in any shape for an evening of cards, let alone a date!

In fact, I was beginning to wonder if I’d ever get to know this gentleman at all.





Episode Four

I, vampire

Things weren't going particularly well with Alice and me. I had met her last summer and was wild about her, but the relationship seemed jinxed; whatever plans we made to get together were frustrated by circumstances.

In spite of my efforts, we had spent our whole first evening together only a week before, sitting in her apartment talking about bathtub rails and hip replacements. She had taken a bad fall that afternoon and, contrary to my vow never to talk about health problems as I got older, we talked about everything from slippery tubs to prostate operations!

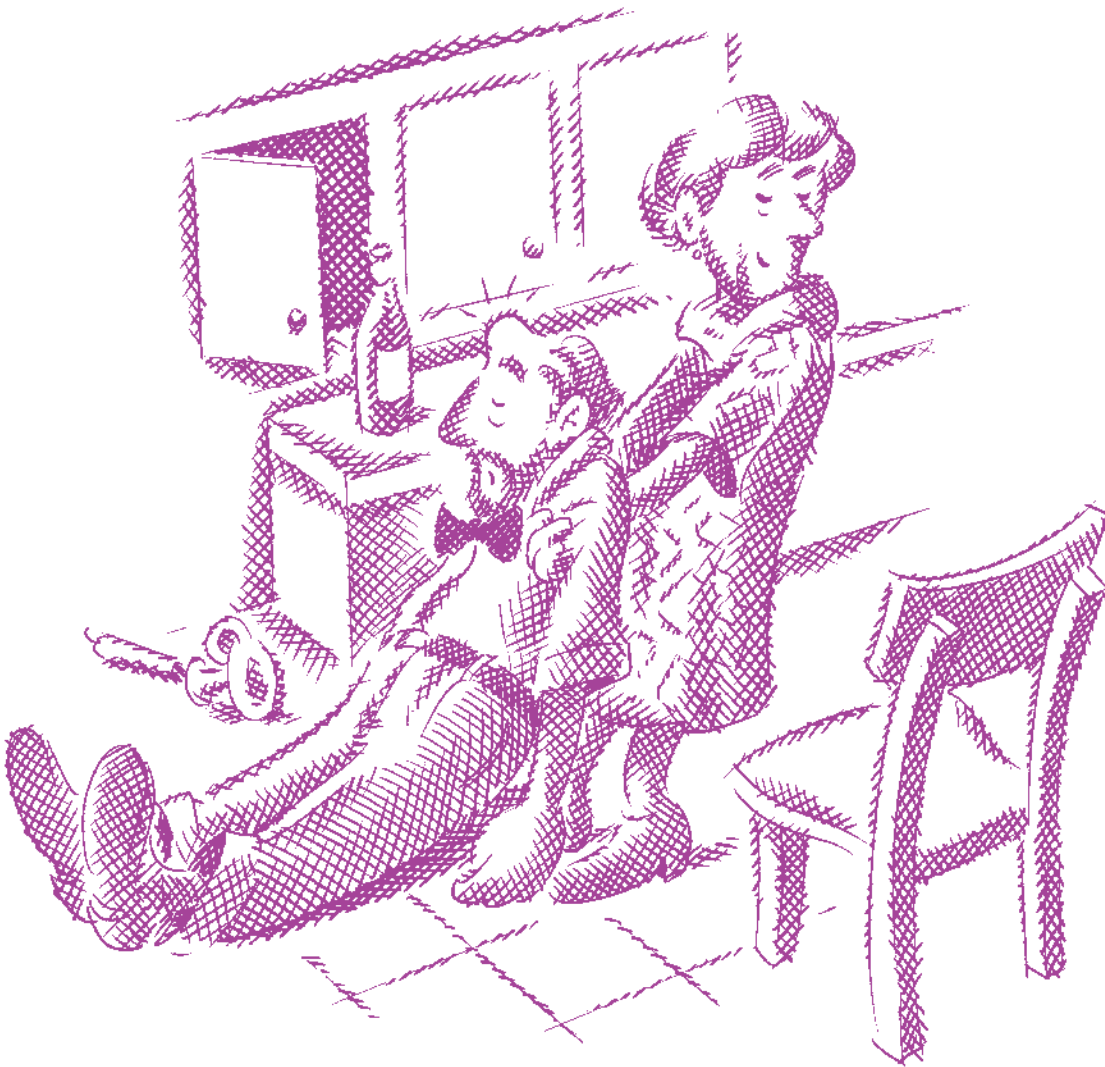
But this night was to be different. Pure romance. I had invited her over to my house for dinner, and it was going to be a great one. I had some steamy jazz on the turntable (yes, turntable), lights dimmed and candles lit when she arrived. I thought the place looked great but, when I opened the door for her, she looked around at the candlelit rooms and said "Count Dracula, I presume." Her comment put me off a bit. I like candlelight but I'm no bloodsucker, and I hadn't learned yet that Alice says whatever she thinks, good or bad. For me, dimming the lights is romantic. Besides, I've always thought that using less light saved money and, frankly, I made a point of leaving most of them off all the time.

I showed her into the living room and offered her a drink. She asked for wine. I slid off the couch and headed through the dark for the kitchen where I marched directly into the corner of an open cupboard, driving it right into my forehead.

I must have yelled out (probably something unprintable) because Alice was beside me in a second, flipping on lights, hauling me up off my knees, helping me to a spot more comfortable than the kitchen floor.

The evening wasn't a total disaster. Alice spent the evening very close to me on the sofa where, tending the growing lump on my forehead, she lectured me on the wisdom of

turning lights on before entering a darkened room. That was the closest we'd been to date, but nothing compared to what happened the next evening we got together.





The fires of love

Let's face it, no matter how old you get, dating takes courage. Even in your seventies and eighties, despite the fact that you don't have to worry about your skin breaking out before a date, there are plenty of things to ruin a perfectly good evening.

One night last September, I was invited over for dinner to the apartment of the woman I was falling in love with. It was only our third date, but I was hoping that something big was going to come of it. "Snow on the roof, fire in the furnace" and all that kind of thing.

When I arrived, she was dressed in a comfortable gown, some kind of caftan, a cotton thing with wide sleeves. She looked fabulous. I'm a sculptor by hobby, clay and bronze, and I had brought her a small piece as a present. It was just a head of a woman, but it had plenty of personality and she loved it. She invited me into the kitchen where dinner was well under way. Behind the stove was a shelf with flowers, which she pushed aside to make room for my sculpture. There, she told me, she would be able to see it every time she cooked.

Leaning forward to straighten it, Alice kind of hovered over the stove. The sleeve of her gown touched an element and we soon discovered that cotton is not what you would call fire-retardant. Her sleeve burst into flame.

Without thinking about it at all, I grabbed her and pushed her over to the sink. I turned on the tap and used the flexible nozzle to spray her with water and put out the flames. Actually, I sprayed her a lot. "Hosed her down," you might say. Instead of being grateful (which someone careless enough to wear loose clothing while cooking should have been), she was furious.

Since then, I've tried to give her a few fire safety tips, even the old "stop, drop and roll" lecture, but I don't think she's listening. More than once she's asked if I've joined

the volunteer fire department yet and, when she's being really snide, she stills calls me "Sparky." She's obviously crazy about me.





It takes two to cha-cha

Part of growing older wisely is recognizing that, if you want to stay in shape, you have to work at it. I learned that lesson in the middle of a dance floor.

My gentleman friend Bruno fancies himself a dancer. In fact, as he has often told me, for years he signed his letters “Samba Boy.” Being seventy-something hasn’t slowed him down much, and one day last winter he took me dancing. There’s a hall near us that brings in big bands (I didn’t think there were any left!) and Bruno was waiting in line the day tickets went on sale.

Now, I never won any awards or anything but, in my youth, I could tango with the best of them, and my cha-cha had hopeful dance partners lining up to ask me onto the floor. So off we went. As the song says “We could have danced all night...” except for the fact that by the third number, I was exhausted. I guess I had let myself slip out of shape—never exercising. What an embarrassment. Bruno had paid a fortune for the tickets, and had even prepared for the event by dredging out his old Latin dance outfit (which, to be truthful, looked ridiculous on him). But I couldn’t keep up at all.

By the time they played the first cha-cha, I could hardly even stand up, but I made myself get back up onto the dance floor. About a minute into the dance, I felt dizzy. I stumbled toward the edge of the floor and stopped myself from falling by leaning right on someone else’s table. I recovered soon enough, but it amazed me that not being fit could have caused me an injury.

I was really humiliated. Bruno had kept himself in great shape all these years through exercise... walking, cutting the lawn, even doing the odd sit-up.

It wasn't that 80 is too old to dance. It was just that I was plain out of shape.

Since then, I've made a few changes. I walk to the library instead of drive. If I'm just

going up one flight, I take the stairs. And I'm thinking hard about that yoga class. Next time they play a cha-cha, I'm going to be ready, and Bruno better be ready too!





Out of our senses

I think it was in February. The temperature was minus-a-million Celsius (even colder in Fahrenheit) and Alice, the woman I had been seeing for a few months, was over at my place for the evening. I put on some coffee and joined Alice in the den. We had just watched a film—some depressing thing from Europe that she loved—and were chatting about whether movies were more art or industry when the wind outside really began to howl.

When it came time for her to go, Alice looked outside and winced. She was afraid to go out in case she slipped and fell. So she asked if she could spend the night... on the couch of course.

Well, why not? I have plenty of spare rooms. No one was waiting for her at her place. It was only right that she stay. But I'll tell you, it certainly

put a different complexion on the evening. I felt like a teenager. Frankly, I couldn't tell how much of Alice's wanting to stay over was actually the weather. I loved her like crazy, and was sure that whatever happened next would be the right thing. Boy, was I wrong!

I was upstairs showing Alice to her room when the alarm went off—a piercing howl that scared us both half to death. I figured it was an air raid, but Alice knew better. "It's the smoke alarm," she shouted.

In my place the smoke alarm is wired to the security system and, within moments, the fire department had arrived. They knew what the problem was right away, and headed for the kitchen. It was the coffee maker. I had turned the thing on but forgotten to put the pot in.

The coffee had poured out onto the element and had fried, sizzled and smoked until it set off the smoke detector. It wasn't a fire; it was a big stink.

There in the kitchen, we could smell it plain as anything but, to our surprise, neither Alice nor I had been able to smell it before. We were both forced to admit that relying on our senses is no guarantee of safety.





Episode Eight

Back flip onto wet grass

My friend Bruno is a sculptor. This March, when the forecast was for three warm, sunny days in a row, Bruno decided to throw a small party to get his family and friends over to see the pieces he had been working on over the winter. He puts on an event like this once or twice a year. It gives him a chance to sell his art, make a little cash, and see all his friends.

The day of the party, Bruno's place was packed. Everyone was very complimentary about his work, and the fine weather made everything seem even nicer. At one point, someone suggested we go out on the back deck to enjoy the warmth. It had been a long winter and the sun felt great. Bruno's daughter was out there with us. But she took one look at the deck and said "Dad, this old deck isn't getting any sturdier."

Bruno who, quite wrongly, fancies himself a handyman, waved her off by saying "Rock solid. Two-by-ten joists every twelve inches. It'll never budge."

Never tempt the gods. As though on cue, the railing which a couple had leaned against gave way, and they both fell backwards into a cold marsh of soupy wet grass. They weren't hurt, but they sure made a fuss about their clothes! Bruno's daughter got immediate permission to find a builder and make proper repairs. The incident was over.

After the party, we went back out onto the deck and checked out the damage. Looking down at the impressions in the wet grass, Bruno was quiet for the longest time. Then he turned to me and said "That could have been us."





Episode Nine

A few dollars and change

I figure Oscar Wilde was bang on when he said that youth is wasted on the young. At the tender age of 75, I was having the time of my life. Alice and I were getting closer all the time, and the loneliness I had felt since my wife died was beginning to disappear.

Alice was spending a lot more time at my house. That was great, except that she was also beginning to notice a number of things around the house that she wanted to change. Alice isn't pushy, but she's straight up and, when something is on her mind, it's on her lips soon enough.

She had attended a workshop on how to make a home safer for older people, and I guess I was her first experiment.

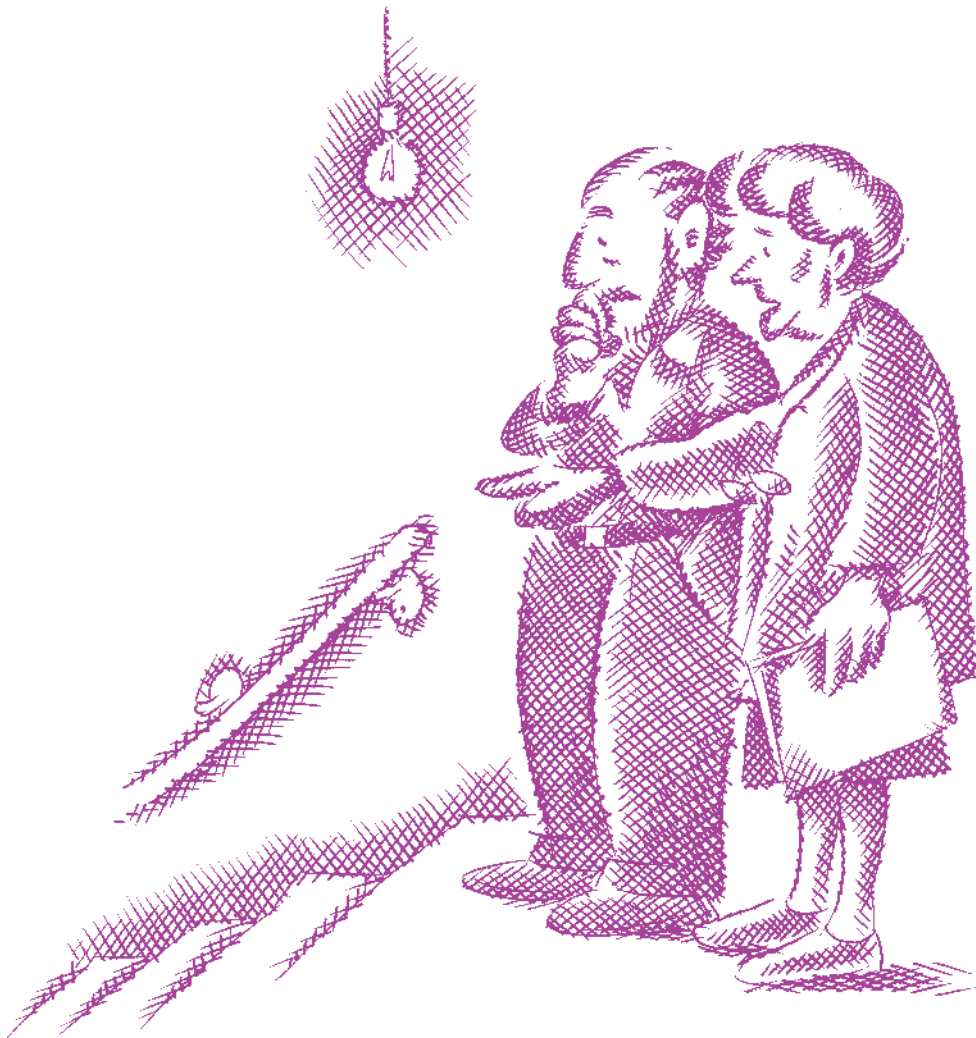
At first I wasn't too comfortable with the idea of making changes. Maybe I was more set in my ways than I thought. Or perhaps I figured that altering the place would somehow be disloyal to the memory of my wife.

I resisted. Alice persisted. One day she presented me with a list of the changes she wanted to make—a phone in the bedroom, better lighting on the stairs, handrails down to the basement, and grab bars in the bathroom.

I guess I kind of sloughed it off. But that didn't deter Alice. Fact is, the changes she wanted to make were all changes to make the house safer—the phone in the bedroom in case of an emergency, better lighting on the stairs so we wouldn't slip, that sort of thing. Alice was doing what I hadn't found the courage to—admitting that we were getting older and that we should accommodate the change.

The modifications were easy. And not too expensive. A few dollars here, a few there. And I felt better when things were safer and more comfortable around the house. I even

made a few changes of my own, including better lighting in the studio where I do my artwork. Now I can see the mistakes I'm making! Another change for the better...





Hey Bruno, your slip is showing!

I have never thought of myself as pushy, and “Velvet Bulldozer”—the nickname they gave me at work years ago—never made much sense to me. I’m pretty diplomatic but I’m not afraid to speak my mind when there’s something on it.

Spending more time with Bruno offered me a few opportunities to get to that point in a hurry. Bruno is funny, caring and creative but, frankly, he was a bit of a slob when I first met him, not to mention slightly distracted. I like to be comfortable in my environment, and being over at Bruno’s more forced me to think about just what makes me comfortable.

I got Bruno to improve the lighting and fix up the stairs. He even got the back deck repaired—all things that made the place look better and made it safer. But it never occurred to us then to make a simple improvement that could have saved us a great deal of anguish and upset.

One night in June, Bruno and I were out on his back deck skywatching (there is a certain leisure to retirement). We heard the front doorbell ring and Bruno leapt up to answer it. He’s a pretty nimble thing at 75, and no one could ever accuse him of slowing down!

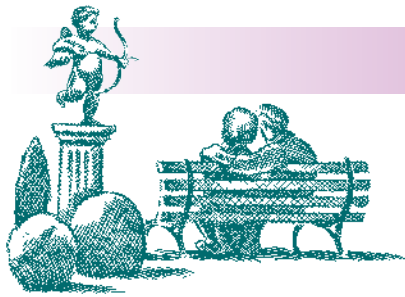
Just seconds after he disappeared from sight I heard a great crash and a yell. I ran in to see what had happened and saw Bruno, flat on his back in front of the door, the broken umbrella stand scattered all around him. Bruno’s daughter was trying to get in to help him but Bruno’s body had pinned the door shut.

The reason for the fall lay right beside him—a lovely Persian throw rug that probably had been in the hallway for decades. The bottom of it was worn smooth after years of use and the rug would take off across the floor whenever you so much as looked at it. And Bruno had hit it at the wrong angle.

I felt terrible. We should have known better. Rugs and mats are classic culprits in many falls at home and, since he wouldn't throw this one out, I decided to pick up a sheet of non-slip underlay at the hardware store.

We should have thought of it before because, when he stepped on that rug, Bruno didn't get the traction he needed. But, after spending the night in Emergency, traction was exactly what he got.





Episode Eleven

On bended knees

Pictures may be the best remembrance someone has of a wonderful period in one's life. Where those same pictures hang, however, can be the cause of irritation.

When I started spending more time over at Bruno's, he had pictures of his first wife all over his house. I'm certain she was a wonderful woman, but things between Bruno and me were getting pretty romantic, and I couldn't turn around without seeing his wife watching me from a wall somewhere. It felt weird. I confronted him about it and he agreed to store the pictures away. Or so I thought.

Two days later, I caught sight of him through the window of his backyard art studio. He was working away furiously, hammering picture hooks into the walls. It was an awkward moment. Privacy is privacy, but I wondered whether my new gentleman friend was creating some sort of shrine to his former spouse.

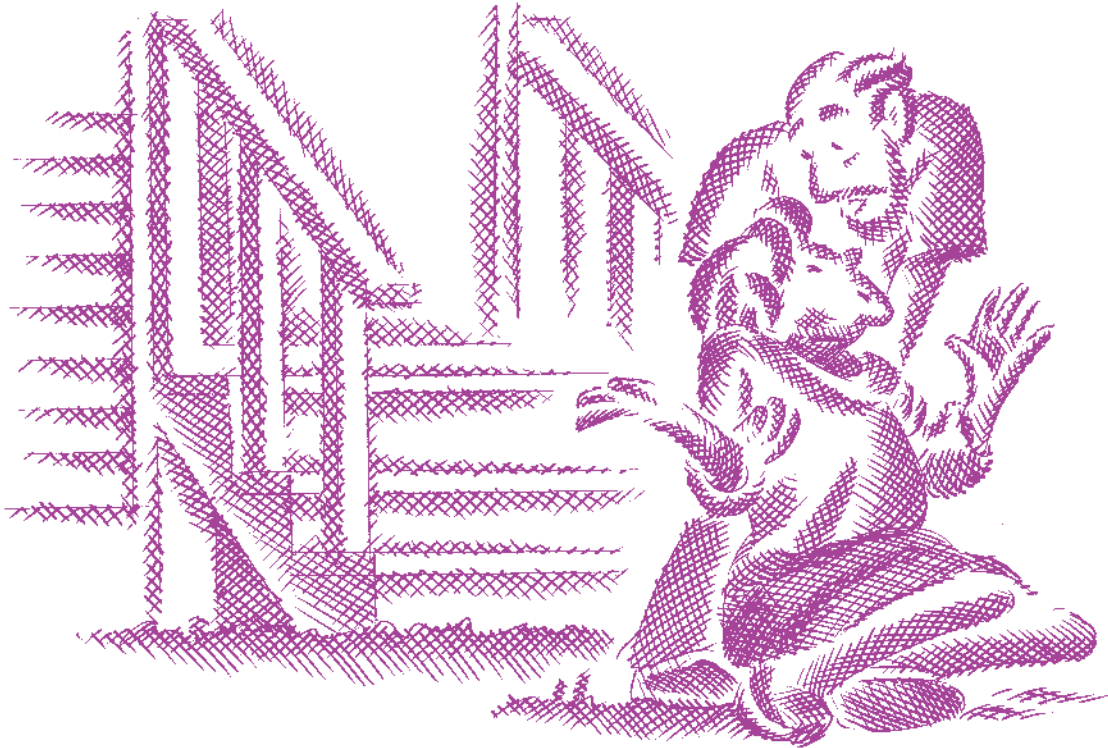
Two days later (the day before my 81st birthday), I came over and found that Bruno wasn't there. Yet the door to his workshop was wide open, banging in the wind. I headed across the yard and up the three steps to the studio to shut it for him. After all, he keeps valuable tools in there. Then, just as I was about to swing the door closed, I heard Bruno's voice in the house calling my name.

Perfectly innocent but feeling guilty, I closed the door quickly, spun on my heel and dashed down the stairs. At my age, I have learned how to manage stairs safely—hand on the rail, moving sideways one stair at a time—but there was no time for such caution now. I went into a headlong rush and, nothing to steady me, I plunged knees-first into the grass, which is precisely how Bruno found me.

Rushing up to me, he wrapped his arms around me as I sat there shaking and asked if I was all right. I said “Everything is okay. Everything is fine.” And indeed it was for, in my brief glimpse through the open studio door, I had seen exactly what Bruno was

up to—a clay sculpture, a perfect image of an older couple reading on a bench.

I had uncovered his secret—a beautiful birthday present for me. The only problem now was how to act surprised on my birthday!





Episode Twelve

You may approach the bench

I never knew how nosy Alice was until she started spending most of her days over at my place. We had agreed on a number of things around the house, including my taking down a few photos of my wife which she had found a little intimidating. That was fine with me.

I was getting pretty used to making changes with Alice around. In fact, Alice had helped me change my life for the better. It was because of Alice that I had admitted that getting older was something I had to face honestly. I had to recognize that I wasn't as young as I used to be and change the pace of my life to something more suited to my age.

The day I took down the pictures and stowed them in the basement, I kept up the momentum by rearranging all the tools in my studio. I nailed up 20 or 30 picture hooks and hung my tools where I could get at them easily.

Now I didn't want Alice poking around the studio, for I had also been working for several weeks on a present for her birthday. It was going to be the best bronze I had ever done, and I wanted it to be a surprise. I guess she figured I was making something special and couldn't stand the suspense, 'cause one day I came home from the bronzing foundry to find her standing at the door of the studio. I don't know if she saw the clay model of the bronze I was working on, but it was in plain view and I can't see how she'd miss it.

Two can play at this game. I never let on I had seen her and said nothing about her present, even the next day when the men from the foundry made their delivery early in the morning. At breakfast, I told her I had something special for her. She beamed. When I handed her a giftwrapped package she smiled a wide smile—at least until she opened it. It was a set of pasta utensils. Alice won't touch pasta. She's from P.E.I. and has a fierce loyalty to spuds. She fumed.

Pretending to be hurt, I turned and walked out onto our back deck. In time, Alice came out, but I'll never know if she came out to give me an apology or a scolding. Because the first thing she saw when she arrived outside was a bronze statue, almost three feet high, of Alice and me reading on a park

bench, just like when we had first met. Now that was a birthday to remember!

And we do, fondly, each time we catch a glimpse of that lovely couple reading in our backyard.

