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February Essay

“Topple”

I dread the drive. I do love seeing my dad one day a week, and I don't mind helping him stay in his house by taking on dozens of tasks, but after nine years of 40-50 trips a year to Fort Collins, there's nothing about the commute that I'm eager to experience. I let NPR wash over me and get into the zone of driving.

Dad's in good spirits when I get there. I'm earlier than usual, because he has a podiatrist appointment today, a routine toenail trim. I help him out the front door, ready to catch him as he leans forward to put his walker on the lower landing and take that step down. A few times a year he comments how smart it was to have the two large slabs of cement instead of narrow stairs, because how else could we have handled Mom or Grandmooney in their wheelchairs, or him with his walker?

His balance is pretty good today, though I notice he doesn't smell great as he climbs in the car. I wonder if he needs to change his clothes. There isn't really time, though, and so we go, willy-nilly, to the doctor's office.

After Dad toppled last winter and broke some ribs, just from the turn on his feet after wheeling his trash bin to the curb, I renewed my Tai Chi practice. I think of him whenever I

balance on one foot, a skill he utterly lacks now. He should probably be living in a facility, but he resists, of course. He's living in the house he bought before it was built in 1960, where his three kids grew up, where his wife of 57 years died after a long illness. He took care of Mom for many long years in that house. I don't have the heart to insist on a move, even if my brain tells me it's time. We've made a lot of adaptations, including handrails and grab bars, and he's finally agreed to a fall detector, so ordering that is on my to-do list.

He's having a good day, more cheerful and cognitively better than sometimes. After we get home and have lunch (mine brought from home, his from Meals on Wheels), I deal with the bills. Two weeks ago, he agreed to let me take over the checkbook, when some mistakes he had made came home to roost. Nothing terrible, but enough to convince him that it was time. I sit at the dining room table, checkbook in front of me, and watch him as he shuffles with his walker to front door to get the mail. He grips the white doorjamb with his right hand, reaching out to the mailbox with his left. He doesn't let go of the jamb until he's tossed the mail onto the seat of the walker. He's managing.

Later, we talk about what months the big bills come due, and I take notes. Next week, he might not remember.