

# *Team* CARTOONISTS DRAW THE LINE AT PARKINSON'S **CUL de SAC**

EDITED BY CHRIS SPARKS

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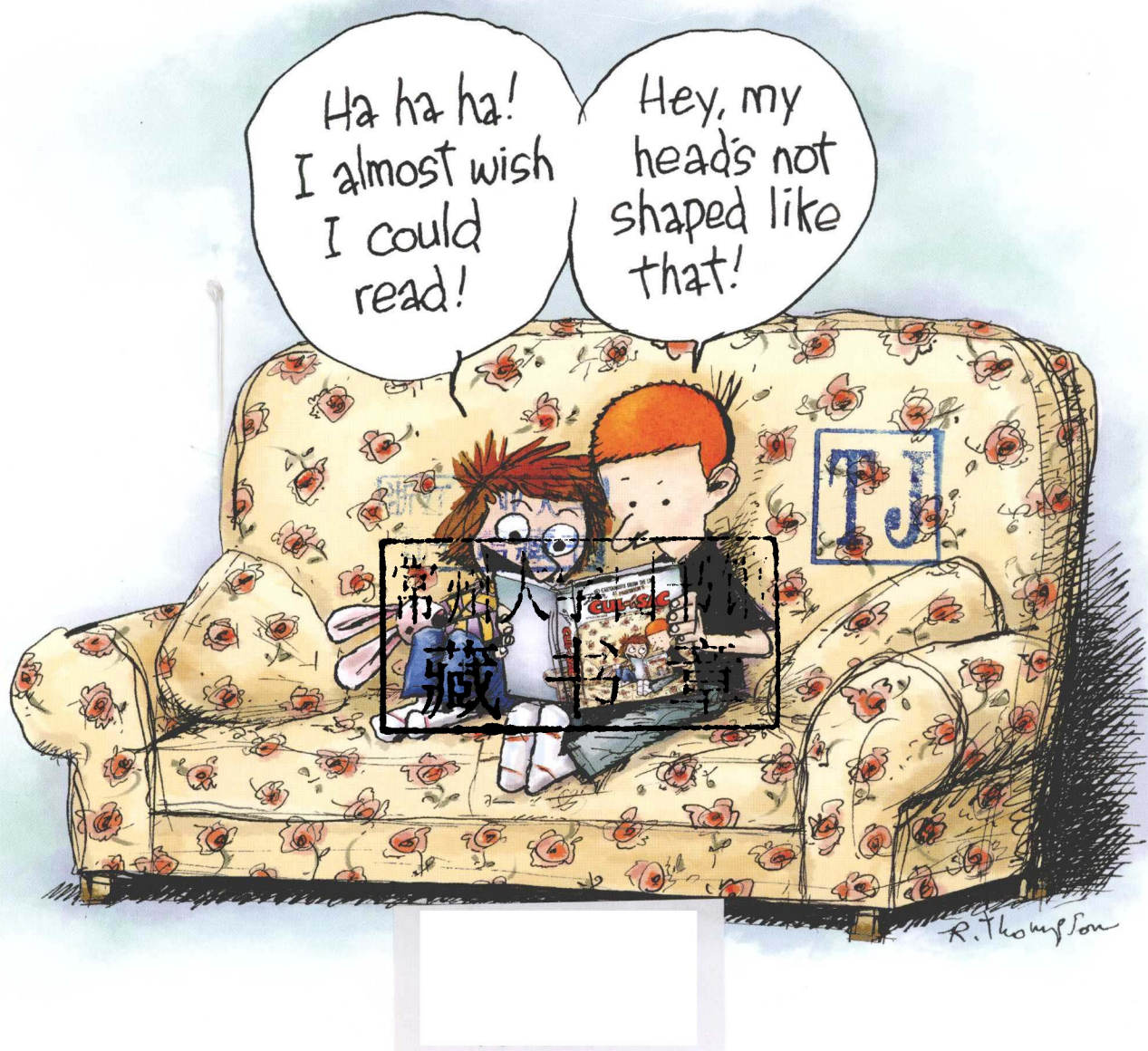




# Team **CUL de SAC**

CARTOONISTS DRAW THE LINE  
AT PARKINSON'S

EDITED BY CHRIS SPARKS



Andrews McMeel  
Publishing, LLC  
Kansas City • Sydney • London



To Mom, Jennifer, and Emily  
With my love

To my bookends, my mom, Thelma, who bought me my first Carl Barks  
*Uncle \$crooge* comic, and to my li'l girl, Emily,  
who I hope finds as much joy from comics in her life as I have in mine.

One of the most important people in this journey has been my wife,  
Jennifer, who has inspired me from the moment I met her  
and was the first cheerleader for Team Cul de Sac.

Richard, I am honored to be your friend, and hope I can face my challenges  
in life as commandingly as you have. Thank you, R. T.

• • •

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thank you to all the artists who contributed and everyone who has supported Team Cul de Sac. I can never express how much each and every contribution means to me. Without you, this project would have never happened.

I also need to thank just a few others who have made a difference in my life during this adventure.

Jennifer, my wife, for buying me Michael's book and supporting me on this from the very second I thought of Team Cul de Sac.

Stephan Pastis said "yes" before I had a plan formulated. With him on board, I had the beginning of an amazing list of contributors and some added confidence to ask for more!

Mike Rhode, Craig Fisher, and S. L. Gallant are a wonderful group of friends who helped me and believed in me on this project. I am so fortunate to have met these wonderful guys.

Jamie King is the other half of Sparking Design. She patiently supported this ever-growing project and was always there to help. I could never ask for a better business partner.

Lee Salem, John Glynn, Caty Neis, Dorothy O'Brien, and everyone at Universal Uclick and Andrews McMeel Publishing made this book possible and were the biggest cheerleaders for Team Cul de Sac.

Michael Cavanaugh can make a three-hour lunch seem like a fifteen-minute laugh. Thank you for your interest in this project.

Peter Dunlap-Shohl and Tim Walker, I can never thank both of you enough for your kind words, encouragement, and being such inspirations.

Shelton Drum and everyone at Heroes Aren't Hard to Find for believing in comics and supporting Team Cul de Sac.

David Kareken pushed me, believed in me, and brought out the best in me. You were right; I needed to do a book involving my passion for comics. Here's to you!

Mike Peters, thanks for your contributions to the auction.

Sergio Aragonés, you are a mentor and a friend. Thank you for making me a better person. Without you in my life, I don't know if this project would have happened.

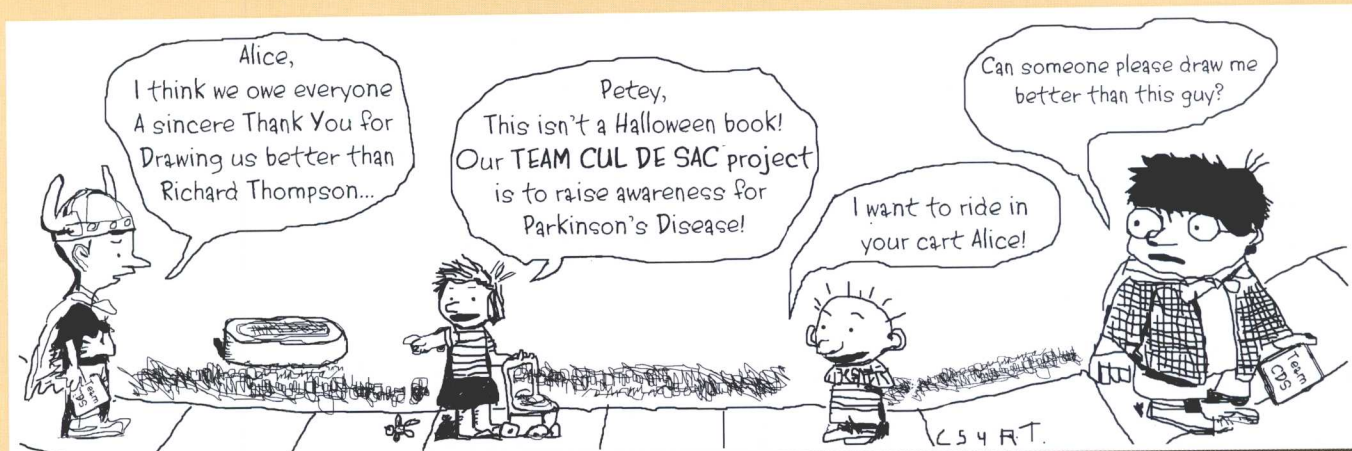
Bill Watterson, you are a man I have admired for years for many reasons. I am honored you picked this project to show us your work. Your contribution brought Team Cul de Sac notice from all over the world. Thank you, Bill.

Richard Thompson, you are an inspiration to other cartoonists, humorists, your friends and family, and fans. Thank you for being the poster boy for Team Cul de Sac. You were so kind to let all of us play in your sandbox. I hope you enjoy the love and support from TCDS. You are an amazing friend, and I'm glad to be a part of your extended family. Who said blundering around can't change lives? Not me! Enjoy, Richard; you are the best.



**CHRIS SPARKS**

editor, *Team Cul de Sac*





# INTRODUCTION

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A wealthy duck, a sword-bearing wanderer who loves cheese dip, a kid with a stuffed tiger, an alien with super-strength, a millionaire with a cowl and utility belt, a dog on his house that fights the Red Baron, a rat, a pig, a zebra, a lazy private, a cat with a food obsession, some prehistoric men. Oh yeah, and some kids living on a cul de sac.

What do all of these things have in common? They captured me in their world. As I grow in my world, I hope I never escape theirs, and I hope I continue to find ways to give back to this community.

I met Richard Thompson in the summer of 2008. We instantly became friends and, as he's said, practically family. About a year later, Richard announced he had Parkinson's disease. I was devastated to know that not only my friend, but also one of my favorite cartoonists, had this terrible neurological affliction.

I learned about The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research and Team Fox as I educated myself about PD. I was inspired by Mr. Fox's drive, innovative spirit, and fearless promotion of his cause. I'm grateful for the opportunity to join the effort to find a cure. This is my chance to don my cape and tights behind a computer screen, unite fans and artists in the comics field, and have them band together to form the most formidable team of all time: Team Cul de Sac.

A heartfelt thank you to all the contributors, especially the early ones who eagerly helped me promote the project and spread the word. Team Cul de Sac succeeds because of you.

Thank you to all the people in the PD community who sent letters. You inspire me, and your words of encouragement keep me focused and strong. I can never thank you enough.

This has been a tremendous challenge, and one of the greatest blessings in my life. The art you see in the book will be auctioned as a fund-raiser, and a portion of the profits of this book will also go to MJFF.

I hope this book makes you laugh, think, learn more about Parkinson's disease, donate, be grateful for what you have in your life, and volunteer for a cause close to your heart.

Life is short. Don't waste a second of it, unless you are reading comics under a tree. That's OK, right? We can all make a difference; we just have to have the encouragement. Maybe this will be yours.

Sincerely,  
Chris Sparks



# FOREWORD

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In the nine months between the summers of 2007 and 2008, three things happened that led to this book and the collection of drawings it holds. First, on September 10, 2007, and after almost fifty years of dawdling, I started a daily comic strip. It was called *Cul de Sac* and at its launch was syndicated to 70 newspapers.

Then, on June 21, 2008, I was at my first comics convention since high school, HeroesCon in Charlotte, North Carolina. I was trying to describe my comic strip to very few people in a very large room when a tall person walked in looking lost and asked what I was talking about.

Finally, though so gradually the date can't be fixed, I began to wonder about some small, odd things, like why the A on the computer keyboard seemed sticky to me but to no one else, and why everyone seemed to be walking faster than me and why it was becoming difficult to put a coat on.

It turned out that drawing a daily comic strip wasn't so scary—I took to it like a duck takes to soup. And it turned out the tall person who'd wandered into my under-populated talk in Charlotte was Chris Sparks, a former comic book store owner and lifetime comics fan from Asheville. Though he'd never heard of my strip and hadn't planned on attending my talk, he fell for *Cul de Sac* pretty much instantly, to my surprise and delight.

And it turned out that those small, odd things I was wondering about, the typing and the walking, etc., were symptoms of Parkinson's Disease.

By the time I found this out in the summer of 2009, other things were going haywire, like my gait and balance. My friend, Dr. Janet Smerec, didn't hesitate in diagnosing Parkinson's, though it can be a slippery disease to pin down. I've always suspected that brains are weird things. My image of how Parkinson's attacks the brain—a stream of tiny gremlins in jumpsuits sneaking through all those convolutions of mental ductwork to ransack the place of dopamine—is probably wrong (it's really an inside job). But I'm certain about the weirdness of brains and I think neuroscientists will back me up, even though they change their mind about how brains function every year or so.

While my first response was to daydream about tiny brain-gremlins, Chris Sparks had a more productive approach. I don't remember when he suggested working with The Michael J. Fox Foundation on the thing that became Team Cul de Sac, but I'm glad he did. And I'm glad that Mike Rhode and Chris Duffy, wiser than I, talked me out of my objection to using characters from Cul de Sac as a theme. As Chris Duffy pointed out, a collection of cartoons focused only on Parkinson's would be as hard to draw as to read. When Roger Langridge thanked me for letting him play with my toys I knew it would work.



My thanks to all who helped with this, Chris and Mike especially. Also Caty Neis, Dorothy O'Brien, John McMeel, and those at Andrews McMeel; Lee Salem and John Glynn and those at Universal Uclick. My love and thanks to Amy, Emma, and Charlotte, who've kept me sane while I've driven them crazy. And all the cartoonists who played so ingeniously with my toys—for them my thanks are bottomless. I'll share my stuff with you anytime.

OR when Parkinson's is defeated and we stop the tiny gremlins from stealing dopamine, you'll all get a place in the ticker tape parade.

—Richard Thompson, February 2012



# PROFILE

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Comic strips are ailing. He's ailing.  
But in his *Cul de Sac*, Richard Thompson's funny bone passes with flying colors.

By Michael Cavna, Published: May 19, 2011  
*The Washington Post Magazine*



Bill Watterson receives reporters about as often as Charlie Brown receives a Valentine. Long viewed as the J.D. Salinger of comics, the creator of the retired and still-beloved strip *Calvin and Hobbes* guards his privacy by rebuffing most every entreaty for an interview.

Now, however, comes a question about a certain "kid strip" cartoonist.

One name, one talent entices Watterson to give what his syndicate says is only his second interview in two decades: Richard Thompson—creator of *Cul de Sac* and father to little Alice Otterloop and her child's-eye view of life in Washington's suburbs.

"Where to start? . . . " Watterson says in an e-mail. "The strip has a unique and honest voice, a seemingly intuitive feel for what comics do best . . . a very funny intelligence . . . the artwork, which I just slobber over. It's a wonderful surprise to see that this level of talent is still out there, and that a strip like this is still possible."

On May 28, 2011, in Boston, Thompson learns whether he has won the National Cartoonists Society's Reuben Award for cartoonist of the year. It is his second straight nomination for a strip that was syndicated almost four years ago. *Cul de Sac* is carried by nearly 150 newspapers, including the *Washington Post*, where it began. It has spawned four books, a handful of animated shorts—and legions of fans.

*Cul de Sac* is a whimsical skip through suburban life with Alice, her friends Beni and Dill, elder brother Petey and her classmates at Bliss Haven Academy preschool. It's all about sidewalk discoveries, childhood invention, parents who are one step behind their children's antics. In this skewed suburbia, the Otterloops drive a minivan whose color is so neutral "it doesn't appear in nature."

A 2007 offering is the prototypical *Cul de Sac*. Alice—"who's not afraid of anything"—is momentarily cowed by winged cicadas. Brother Petey, typically squeamish out of doors, advises: "Do what I do. Construct a distancing fantasy as a coping mechanism." Next thing we know, Alice is costuming the cicadas in napkin dresses and naming



them. By the last panel, the Otterloop parents are reading headlines about intelligent “superbugs” wearing paper clothes. “Don’t tell the kids,” Mom says. “It’ll just scare them.”

“Richard draws all sorts of complex stuff—architecture, traffic jams, playground sets—that I would never touch,” Watterson says. “And how does he accomplish this? Well, I like to imagine him ignoring his family, living on caffeine and sugar, with his feet in a bucket of ice, working 20 hours a day.

“Otherwise, it’s not really fair.”

Watterson wrote the foreword for Thompson’s first *Cul de Sac* book in 2008. The foreword to an earlier Thompson collection was written by another industry legend, Patrick Oliphant, the Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist.

“I know he would hate to be termed a genius, but that is exactly what he is,” Oliphant says now.

So after a measured, decades-long career ascent, Richard Thompson sits at the comics mountaintop. Still, he is keenly aware of a constant fact: The pinnacle is crumbling. Thompson—who at 53 is a year older than the long-retired Watterson—arrived at print syndication in an era of strapped newspapers and comics sections that are so shrunken they could double as eye charts.

And then there’s the second cruel twist:

Less than a year after *Cul de Sac* became syndicated, Thompson learned he has Parkinson’s, the incurable neurodegenerative disease that robs patients of motor skills. His deft line and lithe mind are under attack by his own cells.

Yet here is Thompson, grinning behind his wire rims on a sunny March afternoon as he walks the half-dozen blocks from a taqueria to his modest brick home in Arlington, Va. His gait is tentative. Each day with the disease, he says, brings “a new normality.” But each day also brings the chance to sit at the drafting board, ink-dipped crow quill in hand, and explore new worlds.

As Alice says: “Every day, I test the boundaries of my domain.”



The buttoned-down woman was dropping off her daughter at the suburban Virginia preschool before whisking off to tackle the world’s concerns. This is just the sort of friction point where, morning after morning, Official Washington meets Real-Life Washington.

It was 2003, when Thompson’s younger daughter was preschool age. “I was just watching and thinking: This is a strange little place they’ve got going here,” Thompson recalls. “This single mom had a pretty good government job, dressing up every day, to go work on slightly more momentous things. Just then, the mom picked up one of those [plastic] hamster balls, and suddenly a real hamster popped out.”

The mother reared back and shrieked: “My God, it’s alive!”

In that moment, *Cul de Sac* was born.

“I was struck by adults trying to deal with this childhood reality,” Thompson says. “They were completely out of their depth, with these 4-year-olds running around.”

On Feb. 12, 2004, Alice debuted inside a heart on the pages of the *Washington Post Magazine*, her surname a pun on the “Outer Loop” of the Beltway. It was Thompson’s Valentine to Washington—the Other Washington.

“I lived in the suburbs of Montgomery County for practically 20 years,” Thompson says. “I love the place.”

So what better setting to gently mock?

Thompson, who spent years as a freelance artist for government agencies, various publications and even a neighborhood deli, had been drawing the weekly comic *Richards’s Poor Almanac* for the *Post’s* Style section since 1997. Tom Shroder, the then-Magazine editor, urged Thompson to develop a weekly strip about Washington.

“I just thought his talent for integrating a gag in a situation, and doing it with real nuance and voice, would be perfect for developing and sustaining characters,” Shroder says. “He said he’d be willing to talk about it, and we scheduled a lunch.

“It took two years to get that lunch to happen. Then it took another two years before he handed me the first dozen strips.”



"I was kind of chicken [expletive] about it," Thompson says. "I have a habit of putting stuff off. Till next year."

In 2006, Lee Salem, the top executive for the Universal Uclick syndicate who signed Watterson, came across a *Richard's Poor Almanac* about the first George W. Bush inauguration, titled "Make the Pie Higher," that had gone viral five years earlier. He sent Thompson a note: "You ever thought about syndication?"

The cartoonist met Salem at a Washington hotel, toting photocopied *Cul de Sac* strips. After an affable chat, Thompson left the meeting thinking: "Well, there's another shot in the dark." Months later, Thompson and his family were at the beach near Charleston, S.C., when Salem called. The syndicate wanted to turn *Cul de Sac* into a daily feature.

Thompson had been reluctant to go daily. "There's the fear of the thing running dry on you really fast," the cartoonist says. Yet, "I began wondering what my characters were doing the rest of the week, beyond Sunday to Sunday," he says. "Obviously, they take on a life of their own—a novelist would tell you this—and they demand some kind of say in it."

He walked for two hours on the Carolina beach. It had been nearly three decades since he'd first published illustrations. Approaching 50, Thompson says he realized: "I really want this."



American newspaper comics, for more than a century a staple of popular culture, are arguably suffering through their hardest days since 1895, when the Yellow Kid first popped in full color into R.F. Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*.

As newspapers grapple with shrinking budgets, print strip sizes have been reduced and new syndication sales have declined. *Zits* is the most recently introduced strip to reach 1,000 papers, according to syndicates; it was launched nearly 15 years ago. *Cul de Sac* is syndicated to nearly 150 papers.

"Richard's only apparent weakness is his timing—in a fair world, his brilliant reimagining of childhood would rule the comics page," says Garry Trudeau, who launched his Pulitzer-winning *Doonesbury* in 1970. "But shrinking pages have compelled comics editors to fight a cautious rear-guard action, defending the tried-and-true at the expense of the new."

"It is depressing," Thompson acknowledges. "They say in comedy, timing is everything—and I've managed to time my little splash into the field at the worst imaginable time."

When was the last heyday for print comics? Many fans mourn 1995, when three superstar strips—*Calvin and Hobbes*, *The Far Side*, and the *Bloom County* Sunday spinoff *Outland*—were retired, and the online life of comics began to alter the playing field.

Now, the strip that cartoonists most often say is most worthy of inheriting the *Calvin and Hobbes* mantle is *Cul de Sac*.

"He actually sounds like the kids he draws in that amazing strip," Oliphant says. "What a gift that is, to write the way you talk. No strain, no presumption, just simple wry storytelling with characters you can care about and love. When did you last see that in comic strips?"

"Not since Calvin and his tiger rode off into the sunset."



Nick Galifianakis vividly remembers the moment he knew something was wrong with Thompson. He ran into him at a neighborhood diner and was alarmed. "He seemed to hold his arm stiff," says Galifianakis, who draws the cartoons for *The Post's* advice column *Tell Me About It*, written by his ex-wife, Carolyn Hax. "As my dad and I walked away, we said to each other in Greek: 'Richard's had a stroke.'"

Galifianakis's bond with Thompson dates to the early '90s, when they admired each other's work and would discuss art for hours—Galifianakis, outgoing and garrulous; Thompson, quieter and wry. Soon, the two young couples, Nick and Carolyn, Richard and Amy, would talk till dawn. So, it was with heartfelt concern that Galifianakis arranged for Thompson to talk to a doctor in 2008. "I was having dinner at Nick's house," Thompson recounts. "His dad's girlfriend is an emergency-room physician who's an ace diagnostician. She asked me a string of questions and had me do some fairly simple things and said, 'That's neurological—probably Parkinson's.'"



"I am ever in her debt."

That June, the diagnosis was confirmed.

"Getting diagnosed with this disease is to have your world struck by a meteor, transformed to ash in an instant of unexpected impact," says Peter Dunlap-Shohl, a former *Anchorage Daily News* political cartoonist who received a Parkinson's diagnosis in 2002, at 43.

Thompson, though, found a certain silver lining. "Strangely enough, I was kinda relieved," he says. "Just knowing what it is gave me some focus."

His wife was blind-sided. "He has never taken care of himself, so I thought it was exhaustion," Amy Thompson says of her reed-thin husband. "He had started to look like a zombie." It hadn't occurred to her that it could be something as serious as Parkinson's.

He shared the news with his fans a year later on his *Cul de Sac* blog:

*"For the last year or so, I've noticed a few odd symptoms: shakiness, hoarseness, silly walks, random clumsiness and the like. So the other day, I went to see a neurologist and, after having me jump through hoops, stand on my head and juggle chain saws, he said I've got Parkinson's. It's a pain in the fundament and it slows me down, but it hasn't really affected my drawing hand at all and it's treatable."*

*"And it could be a useful ploy in my ever-losing battle against deadlines."*



The first floor of Thompson's house brims with a spirit as irrepressible as Alice—this is the eclectic stuff of life that collects in a creative home. "Our house is full of costumes, props, and art supplies," Thompson says, "some of it is hard to explain or justify."

Some is his wife's work. She teaches theater at schools and in educational programs, including at the Folger Shakespeare Library. That explains the papier-mache donkey head on the dining room table, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*," Amy says. (Richard's mother set them up after meeting Amy in a Gaithersburg, Maryland, bookstore. "Clearly we were meant for each other," Amy says.)

The couple's daughter Charlotte, 12, breezes in from school and starts telling her dad about her day as he pops his yellow pills for Parkinson's. Emma, 15, isn't home yet. Both daughters have asked whether they are the inspiration for Alice. "No *one* of anybody in my family has inspired any *one* of my characters," Thompson says. But "one of the things I was aware of when my daughters were younger was the process of socialization that all kids go through—it's the whole theme and point of childhood. To learn to get along and stand your ground and form relationships."

Watching his daughters play over the years does inform the strip's sidewalk truisms. "I know street names and addresses and all," Thompson says, "but the kids know where interesting piles of dirt are, or where the good sticks can be found or where a scary dog lives." As we head downstairs toward his basement studio, we're clearly entering the land of Petey, Thompson's most personal character. The 8-year-old is an aspiring cartoonist who abhors nature and sports. An introvert, he sits on his bed for hours devouring comic books and drawing his graphic novel, *Toad Zombies*.

"Petey is a truly original insight," Watterson says. "Wow, what a window into introversion and the childhood craving for stability, order, and control. Alice has no filters, and Petey is all filter."

Thompson acknowledges that *Cul de Sac* is infused with his own personality. "Alice has my obliviousness to what's going on," he says. "Petey is much closer to me, or at least the worst of me. He worries about dumb things; he's a perfectionist when it's unnecessary; he deals with the world best at a distance"—and keeps it at a distance by creating comics and shoe-box dioramas.

"One of my favorite things to do with him is to take him out of his comfort zone. Fish-out-of-water is always a great plot device—and Petey swims in a very small bowl."

A ground-level window lets a welcome shaft of sunlight into the peaceful studio, roughly 12 by 20 feet. It is a fertile place for creating worlds, for "complete disregard for time."



Along one wall are shelves of CDs. While he draws, Thompson listens to Brahms—the favorite composer of late *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz, too. Propped against another wall is a banjo; the shelves above it burst with comic inspiration. Searle. Oliphant. Watterson. Herblock. Herriman. Pogo. “If I stare at these too long,” says Thompson, smiling mischievously, “I don’t get any work done.”

As Thompson wields his trusty Hunt 101 Imperial nib, out of his still-sure hand and mind flow inspiration. “The ideas are a continuous process,” Thompson says. “I usually feel like it’s going on in the back of my head most of the time. The way I’ve set up the strip, with a lot of small gags and some slight forward momentum in little arcs, means that ideas aren’t hard to come by.

“Ideas are easy. Knowing what to do with them is hard.”



At Johns Hopkins—the Baltimore hospital where Thompson was born and where both his parents once worked administrative jobs—researchers such as Ray Dorsey help lead the fight against Parkinson’s.

One million Americans have the disease, according to the hospital’s Parkinson’s Disease and Movement Disorders Center, which says that number is expected to triple in the next 50 years as the U.S. population ages. Symptoms can include tremors, rigidity, difficulty with walking or balance, and a slowing of movement. Plus, “As many as 40 percent of individuals will have depression, which can precede the motor symptoms,” says Dorsey, the center’s director.

The average age people experience symptoms is 60; only 5 percent to 10 percent have symptoms before 40. Thompson says he experienced his symptoms “for years” before his diagnosis at 50.

Symptoms develop when dopamine depletion approaches 80 percent, researchers say. But much about the disease remains mysterious. Dopamine was first identified as an independent neurotransmitter in the nervous system in 1957—the year Thompson was born. A decade later, a high-dose regimen of a drug called levodopa was introduced as a treatment for Parkinson’s.

“The advance with levodopa was revolutionary,” says Todd Sherer, chief program officer for the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research. But “these treatments are only effective for a period of time.”

Thompson takes the drug four times a day. When the medicine loses its effectiveness, the next step could be deep-brain stimulation. “It’s almost laughably crude,” says Thompson with characteristic humor. “They put an electrode deep in your head and turn it on, and boom! You’re good to go again.”

He is encouraged that “researchers have found a treatment that halts the progress of Parkinson’s disease in mice.”

Then he has his own special treatment: “Daydreaming,” he says. It has “gotten me through everything else so far.”



The real *Cul de Sac* is a leafy, loping beauty of a street, still a testament to a past generation’s hopes and modesty. It sits in the Maryland neighborhood of Montgomery Village, on Judge Place immediately past Ironhorse—a name that harks back to Lou “Iron Horse” Gehrig, the great Yankees ballplayer whose career was cut short by the neurodegenerative disease nicknamed for him.

Judge Place is one of three cul-de-sacs from Thompson’s childhood, the one he would live on the longest and where his father, Richard Sr., 88, has long resided.

Parked in front of the elder Richard’s bone-white, two-story house is a green Ford Mustang that easily would have fit in on the cul-de-sac in the early ’70s, back when Richard Jr. was “the kid who draws” as well as “the kid who sucks at sports.” The Mustang has been rebuilt by Tim Thompson, Richard’s kid brother by seven years and a master sound designer at Washington’s Arena Stage.

The cartoonist has fond memories of this cul-de-sac. It was a welcoming place for a young family of four. Richard Thompson Sr. and Anne Whitt Thompson worked various bureaucratic jobs, often for government agencies. They were together nearly a half-century, until her death in 1996. Like them, the Otterloop parents embody understanding, security, and stability.



Anne Whitt Thompson's childhood, though, was starkly different. In a 1982 memoir, she wrote the story of her painful voyage through a string of Charlotte area orphanages after age 6, when her mother died and her grieving father lost custody of his children. The book, titled *The Suitcases: Three Orphaned Sisters in the Great Depression in the South*, begins with Ephesians 4:14: "Children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind . . ."

On the book's cover is an especially poignant illustration by Thompson, drawn when he was in his early 20s, fresh off studying art at Montgomery College. In tenderly rendered pencil-work is a Raggedy Ann leaning against two small suitcases. There's an open door, a threshold into a world of loss and uncertainty.

More Thompson illustrations run throughout the book—three young sisters playing, or listening, or standing atop a slide. The images have an undeniable gravity, reflecting moments of childhood sweetness, yet also a grim foreboding.

"I admired her for surviving a childhood out of Dickens so gracefully," Thompson says of his mother, "emerging not just whole but eminently sane."

Thompson says his dry sense of humor is much like his dad's, but "I'd hope my natural insight into people was as acute as my mom's."



As Richard Thompson takes his small yellow pills, the question lingers: Is the cartoonist hopeful that science will find a cure for Parkinson's in his lifetime? Thompson is encouraged, he says, that "researchers have found a treatment that halts the progress of Parkinson's disease in mice."

Among Parkinson's scientists and patients, the responses are as individualistic as the treatments themselves.

Dorsey, the Johns Hopkins director, says his work focuses on reducing the burdens and barriers of the disease. The Michael J. Fox Foundation, by comparison, states that a goal of its research is to find a cure. "I guess I'm more optimistic than most folks that within my lifetime, there *will* be a cure," says the Fox Foundation's Sherer, who is 38. "I've been in Parkinson's research for 15 years, and even in that time period, there's been a total refocus and renewed energy in Parkinson's based on increased information," continues Sherer, citing developing technologies, new genetic studies, and the influx of researchers into his field.

Dunlap-Shohl, the Alaska artist, speaks from the vantage point of having had the disease for nearly a decade. "In 2002, when I was diagnosed, the standard line was that a cure within 10 years was in our grasp. This is not the standard line anymore," says the cartoonist, who notes that his symptoms compelled him to learn to draw with an electronic pad. The disease is "much less easy to understand than we thought then. At the same time, the tools at our disposal to unravel this complexity are the best we've ever had, and improving all the time."

Still, Dunlap-Shohl says: "Parkinson's disease is hellishly complex."



In June 2008, Chris Sparks headed to the Heroes Convention in Charlotte looking to geek out to a world of comic-book superheroes. What he found instead, he says, was an inspiring paladin and friend in Thompson.

It was the same month Thompson's illness was confirmed. That June would continue to present profoundly life-altering turns.

"I was laughing and snorting so hard at one strip, I had to buy it," says Sparks, an Asheville, N.C., print and Web designer who was riffing through *Cul de Sac* originals.

He and Thompson stayed in touch, a friendship that led to Sparks's design of CuldeSacArt.com. Not long after, Sparks learned of Thompson's illness. His wife, Jennifer, bought him a book by Michael J. Fox about the actor's struggle with the disease. "I wasn't even done with the book when I had my idea."

With Thompson's blessing, Sparks launched a Parkinson's fundraising effort called Team Cul de Sac, reaching out to Thompson's syndicate and to Team Fox, the grass-roots fundraising arm of the Michael J. Fox Foundation. Their plan: Invite cartoonists to create art using *Cul de Sac* characters for a book and auction. Their goal was to raise \$250,000. Sparks, comics blogger Mike Rhode, and former *Nickelodeon Magazine* editor Chris Duffy helped Thompson nail down the book's concept: To ask creators to use *Cul de Sac* characters however they might.



Thompson's guiding words: "Please run with them; deconstruct them, parody them, confuse them, cubisize them, psychoanalyze them, draw them in your own strip, whatever tickles your fancy." By May 2011, more than 100 cartoonists had signed up. Work came in from such veterans as *Doonesbury's* Garry Trudeau and *Garfield's* Jim Davis and *For Better or For Worse's* Lynn Johnston, from such Thompson peers as *Pearls Before Swine* creator Stephan Pastis and Politico cartoonist Matt Wuerker.

Watterson contributed an oil painting—one of his only public art in nearly 16 years. It's a soulful portrait of Petey, looking cartoon goofy yet hauntingly real. ("I was reluctant to goof around with Richard's creation, so I had trouble thinking of an approach that interested me until I got the idea of painting a portrait," Watterson says. "I thought it might be funny to paint Petey 'seriously,' as if this were the actual boy Richard hired as a model for his character.")

Even as Thompson jokes that he is a reluctant "poster child" for this Parkinson's project, he says he is overwhelmed by the outpouring of support. This is all much bigger than just him, he says, a lone cartoonist who can barely think about his next deadline, let alone his long-term expectations as an artist with Parkinson's. "I'm only a few weeks ahead, so thinking too far ahead is even harder for me," Thompson says.

"Especially these days where the whole cartoon business is teetering on a yawning chasm."



Walking around the 2010 NCS Reuben Awards in Jersey City, N.J., Richard Thompson fielded professional compliments from old-time cartoonists nearing 90, as well as young artists working on webcomics or with Pixar. Wearing a timeless tuxedo, Thompson was embodying both the past and future of newspaper comics.

Thompson is a true student of the art form whose work nods to such predecessors as Schulz and Winsor McCay, the creator of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. "*Cul de Sac* is a throwback to the strips of yore," Universal Uclick's Salem says, "when character, artwork, and writing all benefitted from more space in newspapers and an avid readership."

That same talent also inspires such current colleagues as Pastis, who a decade ago launched *Pearls Before Swine* with United Media (a longtime syndication giant that was to shutter its Madison Avenue doors in July 2011—another sign of the industry's shifting sands). "Richard's the kind of cartoonist whose work you look at and say to yourself, 'I need to do better,'" says Pastis, who at the 2011 NCS ceremony was up against Thompson for the Reuben Award. (The third finalist was "Tangled" filmmaker Glen Keane of Disney; Thompson would take home the Reuben.)

Mike Peters, the Pulitzer-winning creator of *Mother Goose and Grimm*, says with a cartoonist's admiration: "There will be a group of us cartoonists at the Reubens who will be waiting for Richard to drop [a 2011 award], and when he does, we will all stomp on his hands."

All the professional bouquets, all the notecards of encouragement—it's tribute to a talent whose strip evokes the glory days of newspaper comics. An artist who, in depicting the quirky world of childhood, also paves the hopeful way for his profession.

"*Cul de Sac* may be the end of the road for syndicated newspaper strips," says Art Spiegelman, creator of the Pulitzer-winning graphic novel *Maus*. "But what a classy place to get turned around."

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	<b>v</b>
Introduction	<b>vii</b>
Foreword	<b>viii</b>
Profile	<b>x</b>
The Exhibit	<b>1</b>
Credits	<b>123</b>
Index of Contributors	<b>127</b>



# THE EXHIBIT