

“Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death”

By Shirley A. Roe

How animated and happy he seems this morning. His voice seems stronger somehow. I set his coffee beside him; he smiles a brilliant smile. Reflecting back over the past few months, I know that any improvement is temporary. His breathing becomes more shallow as the days pass, his eyes are glazed over and now he is telling us this fantastic tale.

“I don’t know what it was, but I wasn’t dreaming. I was actually there and I could walk and breathe without difficulty. Everyone was friendly and happy- some old, some young and there were dogs everywhere. Big dogs, small dogs it was wonderful. I put out my hand and there was a dog to pat instantly.”

I look across to my husband Jim, whose concern is evident on his face. “Tell us more about this place Dad.”

“Well, like I said, I wasn’t dreaming. I went to the strange place and it was something else. You don’t have to take your lunch there because no one eats. A lovely blond woman asked me if I like peaches and I said that they were my favorites. Next thing I know she brings a big bowl of them and I can taste them even though I am not eating them. They were delicious. Oh yeh, I forgot to tell you. No one talks there. They just think words and you can hear them. It is amazing. I don’t know how they did it.”

He laughs, a strong boisterous laugh. The sound that we have not heard in so long fills the room. I cannot help but smile. He is happy today. Wherever it is that he thinks he has been, it has brought joy to his face and laughter to his lips and I am thankful.

He sits back in his chair and falls asleep. Jim and I look at each other with tears in our eyes.

A few minutes later, Dad smiles and starts to laugh. He looks at us with eyes glazed over and smiles. He does not see us.

Hours pass and once again he relates his experience, which he remembers with astounding clarity. "That was something else, I can't get over it. What a wonderful place."

I ask him if Mom or I were there with him.

"Well, you were there but you were outside. I saw you outside with some people and they were showing you something. But you didn't come in. I saw Mom at first but then she wandered down a long tunnel. I called her back but she didn't hear me. I was worried that I would lose sight of her." Once again he laughs out loud at some unheard joke. I leave the room.

Upstairs alone, I pray for the strength to watch my Father die. He is hallucinating, he can barely breathe and I can do nothing to help him. Yesterday we went to the doctor and although it was a follow up blood test and x-ray, I could tell by the look on the doctor's face that he too could do no more. I know that my Father is 86 years old and that he is not well. His heart is enlarged and his blood pressure is barely detectible. I am not kidding myself but still the doctor's words echoed in my head. "Good Luck, Jack," he said as the old man shuffled down the hall.

Each night I fall asleep wondering if he will live to see another day. Over the past few years I have developed the habit of looking into my parent's bedroom each morning and simply checking to see if they are breathing. It is a strange habit I know, but one that

I have adapted without consciousness since they turned 83. Fortunately for three years all has been well. I roll over and my eyes open. I hear him talking in his room.

“Please, leave me alone. Get away from me.” He shouts at an apparition only he can see. He shouts a few more times over the next hour or two. He falls back to sleep. I toss and turn for hours until exhaustion wins out. I sleep but always I listen for more shouting.

It is 6 a.m and I stand outside of his room listening to him talking. “Get away from me. Get out of my house.” Then he mumbles incoherently.

“See the little kid, that is my daughter, she will take care of everything,” he calls out. My heart pounds in my chest, I swallow back the cry that wants to escape from my throat. My thoughts cry out.

“I can’t take care of it, I can’t help you. Oh Daddy, I love you but I can’t do anything.” My heart is breaking. He calls out once again. I must go to him. Gently I shake him, “What is the matter Dad?”

“Are they gone? Did you get rid of them?”

“Yes Dad, they are gone. What did they do to you?”

“They stole my ring and my watch. They wouldn’t let me go. I didn’t have any water, I was going to die.” He gasps for air. I lift the glass from the nightstand and gently guide it to his lips. He looks up like a frightened child and takes a sip.

“I need my ring back. I need it.” He is insistent.

I reach up on his dresser and hand him one of his many rings. “Here it is Dad. They must have dropped it. Here you put it on and you’ll be fine.” He takes the ring and puts it on his finger; his wrinkled hands shake. Water drips from his chin.

“Put your hand under the covers and your ring will be safe,” I reassure him. He closes his eyes and I leave him to his unsettled sleep. I feel useless. My normal day is scheduled, controlled and organized, now I am useless. I am unsettled. As much as I struggle against it, I am starting to come unglued.

Later I take him downstairs-his movements are slow and labored; his breath comes in gasps. At the bottom of the stairs, he tells me to lock the door so “they” can’t get him. I settle him in his chair with coffee and sandwich and go into the kitchen so he won’t see my tears. My husband walks in the kitchen and comforts me but I see the same look in his eyes. He is frightened, he knows that the situation is becoming worse. “I am going to take a shower, I have to pull this together,” I tell him. I leave him standing-watching his wife, the person who is usually in control, beginning to crumble before his eyes. This situation is affecting all of us. But he is relieved ten minutes later when I appear dressed, groomed and appearing stable. The morning continues without incident.

I take my Mother on a quick shopping trip. She is not good in crisis and has always stepped back to let someone else handle things. Sometimes I find this irritating because the “someone” is always me and with a full time job and a husband, my time is already full. In this instance however, I can see that she is completely stressed out and at 86 she is handling it as best she can. I take her with me to give her a break from the tension that is growing in our home. We return to find my husband and my Dad sipping tea and looking perplexed. “What is the matter?”

“I’m going crazy.” Dad shakes his head in disgusted confusion. My mother goes to the bathroom, making a quick exit to once again avoid the situation.

Jim accompanies me into the kitchen and relates the afternoon events. He returned from some errands to find Dad on the front door step waving frantically.

Rushing to the house he asks what is wrong.

“They’re here, those bad guys, they’re here. They went upstairs and they are locked in the bedroom. I pounded on the door and shouted but they won’t leave.” Dad is shaking- breathing in short pants; he is panicking.

Jim immediately tries to calm him and goes upstairs, more to satisfy the ravings of a confused mind than for any other reason. All of the doors are open and of course, no one is there. He returns to the living room. “All right now, no one is there.”

“What do you mean, how did they get past me? How did they get out.” Confusion is evident on his sallow face. He sits back trying to make sense of it. A spotted wrinkled hand moves to his eyes as if trying to clear the confusion from view.

“Don’t worry about it, I am home now. Want a cup of tea Dad?” Jim goes to make the tea but is called back.

“What is that white thing hanging from the ceiling?” Dad is pointing into the hallway.

“Tell me where it is.” Jim moves into the hall reaching for the invisible object.

“More to the right. Yeh, that’s it. What is that?” Jim moves his arm back and forth in the empty air.

“There is nothing here. I don’t see anything.”

“Nothing? I’m seeing things, aren’t I? I’m going crazy.” Tears form in his glassy eyes. He sits back in his chair and shakes his head. Jim is overcome with sadness. It is difficult to watch a once vibrant man turn into the confused, sad person before him.

“I’ll get that tea.”

The story causes two emotions in me. One is guilt for having left him alone if only for a few minutes, the other is extreme sadness. Things are not getting better. I look with love upon my husband. For fourteen years he has lived with my parents without complaint. There have been times when problems have arisen but through it all he jokes and laughs with the old folks and never complains. I love him. I hope he knows this because I know I am preoccupied with my father at present. I am sure that I am not giving my marriage the attention it deserves. I want to be all things to all people but it is impossible. I know this but I find it hard to accept. I file the guilt away and unpack the groceries.

It is time to tell my siblings, I call my brother. “Don’t mean to alarm you and please do not panic but Dad is hallucinating.”

My brother is in denial, he asks when the doctor is going to do something about this and can’t they just change his pills or something. I assure him that the doctor is doing all he can. I agree to keep him updated on the situation. He picks the folks up every Sunday and takes them out. Sometimes for a country drive and lunch or simply back to his house for the day, but he arrives every week without fail. He is a good man- my brother and I know that this Sunday he will see a decline in our Father’s well being. I wish I could spare him this pain.

I try to call my other brother but he is not home. The youngest, he keeps his distance from the situation and visits only when called. I do not judge him; I simply think he should make an appearance soon.

It is 6 a.m. and all is quiet. We have made it through the night without a sound. No shouting, no laughing-just the silence of a sleeping household. I stand outside the bedroom door and watch them both sleep. My Mother rolls over. My Father does not move. I hold my breath.

Seconds later he coughs. I smile and close the door.

8 a.m and I hear shouts from the bedroom. Dad is having chest pains, I go for the Nitro pills. A few minutes later he seems better but his breathing is shallow and you can see the fear in his eyes. He pulls me to him and gasps "I love you." By 9 a.m. the paramedics are loading him into the ambulance, Mom travels with him and I follow in my car.

The emergency room is a buzz of activity, nurses, doctors and nursing assistants move like a well-oiled machine from cubicle to cubicle. The oxygen is helping Dad breathe. His color has returned and his blood pressure is stabilized. Machines beep and blip around him, wires lead from his chest, intravenous lines drip some magical fluid into his veins, he smiles. The fear has gone, he feels secure in this sterile environment.

"Congestive Heart Failure," the young emergency doctor says. My father stares at him blankly. I know he does not hear him. I instruct the doctor to speak louder as Dad is hard of hearing. He shouts, "You have fluid around your heart, that is why you are having trouble breathing. We are giving you diuretics to ease the fluid build up." He turns to face Mom and I to be sure someone in the room can hear him. We nod in acknowledgement.

Dad looks at us for an explanation.

The rest of the day passes in a flurry of blood tests, x-rays, poking, prodding and friendly nurses who come and go in a wink. He is finally admitted. The diuretics have not worked, his heart beat is too slow. The Heart specialist will see him tomorrow morning.

Schedules are made for visits to the hospital, all of our lives are turned upside down for days. I arrive at the hospital to find my brother visiting. He looks worried. “The door was closed when I arrived. Dad was sleeping. In my mind I thought, *I hope he is sleeping.*” He closes his eyes; I know he is praying. I empathize with him because this has been my thought every morning for three years. I approach the bed and greet Dad with a cheery “Hi” and a package of chocolate.

No improvement, he lies with oxygen pumping through the lines in his nose. He knows we are there with him but you can see the doubt beginning to form in his eyes. He wonders if he will ever come home again. He asks for another blanket, he is cold. A chill runs down my spine.

My father died in 2006 on Nov. 1. He is now resting pain free and at peace. My mother is now 90 years old and still lives with me. One day I will have to cope with her leaving, I do not look forward to it.

*Walk in the valley, shadows on the wall.
Commune with the elders, they will tell you all.
The valley is deep and long but the rewards are rich.
Into the valley you will ride alone and unafraid.
Hesitation will be your guide but love will be your way. ©*

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