

## Morning Light

By Dianne Avey

Sometimes the morning light over the small inlet where I live is so pure that I am held captive by it. To the west out the mouth of the bay, is a steep tree-covered point that juts out into the sound, known as Devil's Head, one of Mike's favorite fishing spots. This morning, the light is clear and delicate, the tiny cabins across the inlet are perfectly mirrored in the still green water, a few ducks dot the surface and a few gulls fly overhead, otherwise, everything is motionless. The sand spit at the mouth of the bay is speckled with islands of lime green seaweed and a line of white shells marking the last high tide; a lone heron stands sentinel on the end of our dock. I breathe in deeply; this place has been my center point in a shattered life

*Is this the day, I wonder? Is this the day my husband will die?*

I think I've slept for three hours, maybe less. I pull on some sweats and head to the kitchen. It is September; the slate floor feels cool under my bare feet. The scene in the living room three steps below the kitchen appears much the same as a few hours ago. I ask my nephew, who came to help, "How is it going?"

"There really hasn't been much change." In the sunroom of our home, which now looks more like a hospital room, he leans over the railing of Mike's bed, a bed we'd had delivered just nine days ago when I finally demanded Mike be placed on hospice care. "His breathing is about the same, still pretty shallow, I don't think he is in much pain," he says as he adjusts the white sheet and tugs at the pillow under my husband's head. "I've kept up with the IV morphine and he seems comfortable. I made some coffee."

"Thank you, I need it." I pour a cup and walk down to check on Mike. His body seems so small, lying under the thin white sheet. The light from the sunroom windows casts a shadow through the sheet where his hipbones tented the sunken hollow between bone and flesh. I lean over the railing and kiss his forehead. No response. His breathing is rapid, his breath - like acetone, his thin, papery skin, now an eerie bronze color from organ failure.

Dying is not pretty, still he was Mike - my husband. Suspended somewhere between here and there; this place of quiet morning light, and some other place of soft pure light that I prayed would take him soon.

From my years as a hospice nurse, I knew that the last sense to go is the sense of hearing, so I continue to speak to Mike quietly and often. "Aidan and I are fine... Aidan is still asleep... we love you... we will be ok... we're going to be ok... I promise." I whisper into his ear, not sure if I am trying to reassure him or myself.

I move around to the other side of the bed and sit on the bench seat under the large windows of the sunroom. I lower the railing down and reach under the white sheet to his arm; his skin feels hot and dry. His breathing and heart rate are getting more rapid. I know that the end is near, but Mike in his typical tenacious fashion, will not give up easily. A part of me wants this to be over, another part of me - the selfish part - wants to hook up an IV bag of saline, pump him up with fluids, stop the narcotics and get him to open those beautiful green eyes *just one last time*.

My old ICU-nurse-self and my old hospice-nurse-self duke it out and go rounds with each other in my brain. One sees death as the enemy to be beaten back with an arsenal of weapons; the other sees death as a welcomed friend coming to take my husband home. To be honest, neither of these choices seems fair or even logical. My husband had been stolen; I want him – the healthy strong man that I married – back. I want his arms around me. I want to see him hoisting Aidan up on his shoulders and dancing around in those silly Birkenstocks with wool socks. I want to see him bent over at his desk, studying the latest Archeology journal. I want his socks on the floor, his plaid bathrobe next to mine, his coffee cup – white Dansk with the blue rim – on the antique trunk next to his favorite green chair.

I am mad that despite every damn thing we endured, he is still going to die. I am mad that the best of the medical profession - my profession - has failed him. All the leukemia cells were gone, but the “cure” proved too much. The stem cell transplant—a “success—but the patient will likely succumb to severe graft vs. host disease affecting multiple body systems,” medical jargon for a living hell. Tiny moth-like antibodies have eaten away my husband, who is now a threadbare-shell of his former self.

I lay my head down on Mike’s chest. There is still a measure of comfort and reassurance in even the tired rise and fall of his chest. I loved that chest, it was my Sunday morning pillow, my place of respite from a stressful workday, a safe place to come back to center. I turn my focus out the window toward the water. Puget Sound is my oath of peace, my book of Psalms, God’s poetry to me in the rhythmic ebb and flow of water. There is reassurance in the countless ways the beach re-invents itself at low tide and the gifts of small water-worn talismans I collect in my pockets. Smooth black rocks veined through with magic hieroglyphics, bits of shells with extravagant pinks, lavenders and blues; and the worn bits of sea glass or pottery that found their way into glass jars and bowls all around our home. Cycles of life - tides gone in, tides gone out. The winter geese are returning, the leaves on the large maple beginning to turn a glorious shade of gold.

I wondered how it will be to be a widow at a young age, and how will it be for our son, now six, to grow up without his father. What is *this* death here to teach me? In my career, I’ve been around hundreds of dying patients – some with the onslaught of full court press technology, others in the quiet back rooms of a suburban home, or the lonely wards of a nursing home. I hoped that I had shown a measure of compassion, a sense of honor for the lives that slipped beyond the veil under my care. Each death is as different as the life that is passing. I have spent many hours with the dying; I have spent many long days with my dying husband. Nothing can prepare you for this. Nothing.

By far one of the hardest steps is knowing when to move from cure to care; from one more intervention or experimental treatment – to a bed, a soft pillow, and a warm cup of tea. This was the subject of my Master’s thesis in graduate school – how do families make this decision and did they feel confident in having their loved one die at home. I was so young and naive. I can still see the faces of those bereft souls who tried, each in their own way, to explain how giving up on hope felt like betrayal, often carrying a burden of guilt far too heavy for one to bear. This morning, I knew this burden, I could feel the weight of it on my shoulders.

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Ten years later, I still remember that quiet September morning. The kind hands of helpers, a warm cup of coffee, a soft yellow quilt, a book read to my son by a neighbor, the geese arriving, the finches departing, the words I tried to speak, but were never adequate. And finally, in the end, the only thing we can ever do – is be present and bear witness to the miracle of a departing soul. Sending our loved ones off with a traveler’s prayer and a silent wish that we will, one day, meet again.

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