

Waiting

By William French

Caroline began to hear again the way an arm that has gone numb begins to feel once blood flow has been restored: uncertain, painful, and agonizingly slow, like a thousand needles being inserted at the same time. The world into which she was floating was a dark cacophony of meaningless noise, disconnected strings of sounds suspended in a vast empty space.

When she became aware that she had eyes, she cautiously cracked her eyelids. Instantly, her optic nerves were assaulted by an excruciatingly brilliant pillar of light, as though she was hurtling directly into the sun. Instinctively, her eyelids dropped like hot stones, and she was once more blind. Now, she concentrated all of her effort on hearing and trying to process what her body was experiencing.

At first, she sensed that some part of her was moving, legs, arms, backside. The memory of these body parts came back to her in little jolts of sharp pain, like being touched by a live electrical wire. She grimaced involuntarily and tried to take a deep breath, to scream out some kind of protest. But her voice was pushed back into her lungs by an outside force she couldn't control or even understand. A shrill sound from somewhere outside herself rushed at her. Her body stopped moving, and the sound ceased before she could determine what it meant.

Then the jolts started up again, faster, more urgent. Limbs were being dragged; joints compressed, bent in unnatural angles. The parts that she could feel seemed both hot and cold at the same time. Again, she tried to scream; again, the air was crushed back into her lungs, followed immediately by the same shrill sound. Desperately, she ordered her arms and legs to move; they didn't respond. She was helpless. She had no idea where she was or how she got into this condition, whatever this condition was.

For a moment, Caroline entertained the notion that she might actually be dreaming, that nothing she was experiencing—or at least sensed she was experiencing—was real. However, she rejected that theory once she determined that the pain and the sensation of panic were far too compelling, too insistent, to be a dream. She knew somehow that she would have to sort this out, to focus, to remember.

She started by concentrating on the noise that surrounded her. It wasn't as chaotic now. The strings of staccato sounds were coming at her only one at a time, and after a minute or so she began to recognize them as human speech, phonemes piggy-backed onto each other to form words, words that she could process somewhere in the left side of her brain.

What she was certain she recognized first, however, was laughter. There would be a few words shot through the air, and this would be followed by laughing. The laughter confounded her. Here she was, apparently trapped within a body she couldn't control for reasons she did not know, and someone—or ones—outside her umbra seemed to think something was funny. She focused all her energy on processing the words: "...James said that?" one voice said. "Yes," a second voice answered. "And you believed him?" the first voice asked. "I guess so... why shouldn't I?" the second voice returned. "Girl...didn't I tell you not to trust that dog?" the first voice said. This was followed up by more restrained laughter.

Caroline tried to make sense out of the exchange, but she couldn't. She didn't recognize the voices and she certainly didn't know who James was. While she was considering this, she realized that she was no longer moving. What she could feel of her body was now mostly warm and settled.

"Need any help?" came a third voice that seemed further away.

"We're done in here," the first voice replied.

"Is the TV on?" the third voice asked.

"No," the second voice answered, now not as close as it was a moment ago. In fact, all three voices seemed to be drifting away from Caroline, as though they were on a raft being carried out to sea. Or perhaps she was on the raft.

"The family wants the TV left on...the Worship Channel, I think," the third voice said.

There were no more voices after that, only the muted sounds of music that Caroline couldn't quite make out. But somehow it seemed to provide comfort, to soothe her confused and overwrought brain. Gradually, all sounds disappeared completely, and she lapsed into what might have been sleep but perhaps was merely situational apathy.

Sometime later (she had no idea how much later – minutes, hours, days, lifetimes) she once again became aware of voices. Once again, she tried to crack her eyelids and, once again, her eyes were blinded by great shafts of light. Somewhere on her face, she thought she felt something warm and soft: a hand, perhaps, although she couldn't tell for certain. She concentrated on the voices that seemed to flow back and forth over her head, so close she might have been able to reach out and dip her fingers into the stream, if only she could move her arms.

"As you can see," one voice, a deep resonant male voice, began, "There has been absolutely no change in her condition since she's been here."

"And...you honestly don't think there will ever be a change?" a second voice asked. This voice was softer, more tentative. Caroline thought it sounded vaguely familiar, a voice she somehow knew well but couldn't quite identify.

"Well..." the first voice said slowly, "It is impossible to know that with one hundred percent certainty. However, I would not want you to cling to...false hope."

There was a long pause after that. The fingers on Caroline's face pressed harder, stroked the cheeks and lips. It was a pleasant sensation. For a moment, she contemplated the dialogue she was hearing. Were they talking about her? What did the first voice mean by false hope?

"What do you think we should do?" the second voice asked finally.

"I can't answer that for you, Ms. Turner," the first voice replied. "But I think you need to consider the quality of life and your mother's wishes. She could be like this for a long time."

Caroline locked onto the word mother. She was somebody's mother, somebody named Ms. Turner. Karen, she suddenly realized. She had a daughter named Karen. It was Karen's voice she recognized through the dense fog that shrouded her. Whose was the first voice?

There was another long pause followed by what sounded like a sigh. "I need to discuss this with my brother," Karen said. "Explain to me again the alternative."

"We take her off the ventilator and remove the feeding tube," the first voice said.

"But won't that cause her to choke or asphyxiate or something?" Karen asked.

"I honestly don't think she'll feel anything," the first voice said. "But we'll give her morphine just before we take her off the vent, just in case."

"And you really don't think she'll ever get any better?"

“Ms. Turner...as you know, I’ve been following your mother for three weeks. The ER doctor thinks she might have been hypoxic – without oxygen – for several minutes following the heart attack. It was a miracle that she survived at all, considering. Her EEG in the hospital showed minimal brain activity, and she failed at least one apnea test. Frankly, I can’t explain how her heart continues to beat after all the damage it sustained. In my professional opinion, your mother will never get any better than what you see right now.”

There it is, Caroline thought, as she processed the conversation. Some part of my brain is alive. But not the part that can control my body. The body is dead and the brain is suspended in some sort of medical limbo. Once again, she tried to remember what happened to her so many days, weeks ago.

But all she could remember was that there had not been any pain, never any pain. Nor had there been any fear. In the distance, she had seen faces: her mother, her father, her husband, perhaps even her older brother. They were smiling at her, calling to her. And then they had just disappeared, and there was nothing, just a sky as black as tar, no stars, no planets, no moon, only empty space.

And now there were only voices dangling precariously like burned out light bulbs, trading words, talking about her as though she was already dead. Perhaps they are right, she mused. Caroline Washburn does no longer exist. All that remains is lunacy.

“All right,” Karen began slowly, “I will talk to Mike tonight. I’ll let you know tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine,” the first voice said. “But I don’t advise putting it off too long. The decision only gets harder.”

“I understand,” Karen said.

That was the end of the conversation. Caroline felt the hand soothe her face, her matted hair. Then it was gone, and she was alone once again. From somewhere in the distance, she could hear soft music, singing, gentle words being spoken, the television, probably.

But perhaps it wasn’t the television. Perhaps it was the voice of an angel, the voice of God calling to her, calling her home, telling her it was time, that it would be all right, to just let go. It was all so beautiful...and yet so distant. “I’m ready,” she screamed out in absolute silence. “Please open the door.” Then she relaxed and tumbled into a sweet, merciful sleep in which she would have no dream.

William French is a retired respiratory therapist who throughout his long career worked in more than twenty different clinical venues. He is also a professor emeritus and has published research-based nonfiction, some poetry and short fiction, including two books, *Breath of Life: Poems and Stories from the Front Lines of Health Care*. His latest work appears in the *West Texas Literary Review*. He has a MA from Ohio State and a diploma from University of Chicago.

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