

It Was As If

by Lucie C. Boucher

As you walk in, you immediately feel welcome and comfortable. Most of the furniture is exquisitely handmade. You know how wood can be so very soft that you want to run your hand over it just to feel how silky it is? There are beautiful touches everywhere you look in their home – a series of art quilts on the wall, elegant colored glass hanging in the window, oriental rugs over hardwood floors, and healthy green plants everywhere. It's the kind of place where you want to be with friends spending the afternoon chatting and sharing a glass of wine.



As you listen to stories of their life together, you can't help noticing all the wonderfully personal touches throughout the house. There's an authentic personalized military sword on the wall over the wood stove, a two-foot-tall fat-bellied Buddha statue tucked beside a table filled with rocks and plants, a fake stuffed moose hanging on the gable of the cathedral wall, and a coffin in front of the sliding glass doors. Yes, you read that right: a coffin with a pot of markers sitting on top of it. The coffin placed strategically looking over the raised beds in the yard.

As visitors enter, they are welcomed warmly by the husband and introduced to others who are there. All are invited to write a message on the lid of the coffin he built for his wife. The lid is covered with messages specially written for her – if only she could read them. But the important thing about the writing of the messages is each person's opportunity to say a personal goodbye.

If you were to walk further into the next room, you would find her lying peacefully draped with scarves she wore just months earlier. You would see her in her total loveliness if you were bold enough to

enter. But you probably wouldn't because it's simply too intimate – a place for only him to rest his eyes and adore her in her final essence now that she's left that earthly form.

That's how this love story manifests itself: a man caring for his wife's body at home where she belongs. It is one of the most beautiful things I have ever witnessed.

The symptoms started only two months ago, came on suddenly, and shocked both them and their whole community of friends. The emails went out regularly to a list of about a hundred people explaining the plan of care, the diagnosis, the progression of symptoms, the travel to medical centers, and, of course, the waiting. The messages also contained stories of people coming and going, helping as they could, sitting with her as he tended to errands or worked around the house and spent time in his workshop. All much neglected as time moved forward.

They made the decision together to spend the last whatever number of days they had at home together and surrounded by as many people who wanted to share in her last days. They decided together that treatment would only make them both feel worse, especially when there was no guarantee it would do any good.

Over the next month, people came and circled her bed telling stories, drinking wine, and sharing loads of laughs and fun. She joined in as she could with a word or two when she could. Everyone spoke directly to her and included her even when she looked like she was sleeping. She was even able to get up and join friends for dinner every now and then even though she only ate a small bit. She was still included and seemed to enjoy every bit of life that she could. But then, as expected, she began to slow down, adding fewer and fewer comments to the surrounding conversation until they stopped completely.

However difficult those days might have been, they were magnificent to witness for anyone willing to look closely. It was a gift to see the beauty of a husband caring for his wife's every need at every moment. For me that's the true definition of love. Anyone who was there was fortunate to have shared a few moments of that tenderness. While telling the stories now makes me feel almost voyeuristic, I feel them too beautiful not to share. I imagine everyone who had the honor to provide some kind of help or service to the couple has different stories to tell that touched their very souls. And since we all interpret experiences from our own perspectives, it makes the telling different each time. That's why it's so important for everyone to tell their story through their own eyes.



One of the hospice services is for the patient to receive massages if they would like. One evening toward the end of her life, the massage therapist visited and spent time sitting beside her gently touching her left shoulder and hand using only minimal movements. After a few moments, the husband came in and sat on her right side and did the same as the therapist was doing. A few moments later, I joined the group by placing my hands on her feet. No one said a word for about a half-hour. But no words were necessary. The lights were dim, the music was soft and dreamy, and the three of us were concentrating on the loving energy still vibrating through her body. I softly said goodbye to her with a gentle kiss on her forehead, then slipped out of the house. It was time for them to be together without anyone interfering.

During the last days of her life, she needed to be turned in her bed every several hours. I offered to help a couple of nights at midnight. One night in particular, after we turned her and got her settled, I watched as he gently stroked her arm and side while whispering softly to her. I was glad I'm hard of hearing so the moment was all theirs. But I was riveted by the sight of his gentle hand as he touched his beloved wife. Oh, how magnificent love can be when it reaches into the core of your heart. How we would all be blessed with such a love.

After a long while trying to go on living in the face of death, she finally let go and drifted quietly into her own everlasting. I was honored to have been asked to help with her body after she left. It was a truly sacred experience to help care for the body which carried such goodness. There are those who believe the first thing that happens when a soul passes over is we are welcomed by loved ones and bathed as a ceremonial way of washing away the accumulated impurities so as to come back to our true heavenly nature. With that, it makes sense to bathe the earthly body as the last ceremony performed.

Because this was a home funeral, her body was attended to immediately by her husband, her oldest and best friend, another friend who has assisted with about twenty home funerals, and me, one of her more recent friends. We represented decades of friendship and love. The first basin of warm water contained lavender and tea tree oil, which served as a natural disinfectant. This was used to cleanse her body and keep her free of bacteria. The second basin of warm water contained rose oil and fresh rose petals. We women took turns gently holding each part of her body and carefully washing her every inch. We washed her silver hair and tousled the curls just as she always wore it. Her husband didn't help with bathing but he helped move her body and helped keep her covered as we worked. Maybe he didn't want to help because it was too intimate a task to do for the very last time. Maybe it was simply the presence of death. Who knows, really, why we decide to do one thing over another. Finally, using her favorite body lotion we helped each other rub it in so her skin was soft and smooth. And then, with only a bit of hesitation, her husband reached for the lotion with his's work-worn hands and slowly caressed the lotion into his wife's skin, taking his time but lingering only as long as it seemed his heart would allow. This would be his last intimate touch of a body that was so familiar to him. A touch he will probably never forget - a touch that forces an onlooker to bow her head and look away.

We dressed her, moved her off the hospital bed and into the other room where we had prepared a place for her to rest until the burial. Over the next three days, people visited with him, mostly the same people who visited before she was gone. They talked and laughed and cried. They ate meals together and drank beverages of all kinds in her honor. They celebrated her life and mourned her too-early passing. And they did it all at home, exactly where it should be done.

And then it was time to bring her body to her final resting place. I didn't attend the burial even though everyone was invited. We all have our own personal reasons for doing or not doing certain things. For me, for this particular event, I felt in my heart that this highly intimate task should be reserved for family and long-time friends. But I did buy a white rose and put it on my windowsill. At exactly one o'clock, the time of the interment, I bowed my head in prayer to send love and hope to those who did attend. I was lucky later to hear the story from him directly and see many photographs taken by a very thoughtful eye. *(Editor's note: the family has granted permission for the two photos here, taken by Taylor MacIntosh, and choose to keep the others private.)*

With the help of a friend and his brother and his sister-in-law, he loaded the well-wrapped coffin in the back of his pick-up truck. Once it was totally secured, he made the 75-mile drive to the green cemetery where she will rest in perpetuity. The sixty photographs started with three men digging the grave days before anyone arrived. It was about three feet deep and only as long and wide as necessary for the coffin. The pictures tell the rest of the story; a man, a brother, and a dear friend unloading a coffin and placing it on a toboggan. At times he walked beside her and at other times he walked in front. The others pulled her along until they reached the grave where they lowered her into the ground.

Those in attendance were encouraged to share their thoughts as they each put flowers on the coffin. Their faces were serious and quiet – even his. And then they filled in the grave. I said to him as I was looking at the photos of the shovels, “this must have been so very hard for you.” And his answer

was, “not nearly as hard as it was to walk away.” Tears filled my eyes and ran down my cheeks. Then I looked at the few final photos. Imagine a black and white photo of a cloudy Maine day in January. In the foreground in full focus there is the freshly filled grave and in the background, just slightly out of focus is a man, by himself, walking away.

The final photo of the series is a foggy close-up of him, sitting quietly in his truck behind the closed rain-streaked window. It was as if the skies opened and cried for the loss of his wife. It was as if the universe was weeping for her being taken so soon. It was as if the man who is left becomes blurred without her. It was as if.