

A LOOK BACK

By Mary Wiltshire

In this narrative, the author reflects on the life and death of her Choctaw parents. Although the two had been raised in an Indian orphanage with no sense of a family unit, they succeeded in forming strong familial bonds with their own children. After the death of her mother, it was discovered that she had allotted a sum of money in her will that was to be used for grief counseling. This narrative began as an exercise to help expedite the author's own healing process, but she hopes that sharing her experience might help others to heal as well.

*Someday,
somewhere
in a far off land
I will waken,
and remember
and understand.*

Browning

Taking a Look Back...at 1991

To face the impending death of a beloved parent is an emotion difficult to describe. The mixture of anxious fright coupled with the uncertainty of the coming days creates a scenario of "Help! I don't know what to do!" As I faced this time, I searched for some type of guidance, for some type of help, for some comfort that I never quite found. In looking back over this time to aid myself in "healing," I thought that it would be good for me to pen the events of that most tragic year. Perhaps they may be comforting for someone somewhere in time to read and muse over. No one likes to confront sad, inevitable things before they are upon them. God knows the sadness when it begins, when it begins for you, is the loneliest of all times in one's life. I do not know if these events are of interest to anyone other than someone who may have known any of the people who participated in this slice of time. Of course, for me, since this is my life and this is the passage of the life ending for my mother,

it became extremely important that I tell my story.

This is a story that is told only through my eyes. My brothers - Gary, Richard, and Don - and my sister, Betty, all could tell their own. Our mother, as moms can, made each one of us feel as though we were her "special" child. Our memories, of course, are all very much the same. In recounting this time, I shall try to be as brief as I can be, and if I begin to dwell, it is because I am now back to the time wherein I am describing.

I, Mary, am in the year of 1990. I am 45 years old. My mother, Grace Ruebuck Spring Anderson, is 80. My father, Richard Oliver Anderson, Sr., departed this world in August of 1987. Mom seems to have lived with her widowhood remarkably well. How well, however, is an outward observation. I do not know her long, lonely nights. I do not truly know her agony. My father's death is something for me that still hangs as a cloud. I know that it did happen, as I was there and participated in it. I know the events, etc., but for me it still does not seem real. I will come back to this event as I go on into the time for my mom, but for now Mom goes it alone.

We were a tight-knit family, held together by the tying binds of our parents. As different as all five of us children were to become, the one focal point

was the great love shared by our family unit. We all lived minutes away from each other, and although not totally active in one another's lives, we were all very close to Mom and Dad.

It is late summer; the month is August. My oldest brother, Gary, and I have been spending some time discussing the probability of my taking Mom to Washington, D.C., to visit the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian is a common love to the three of us, and since Gary will provide me with four round-trip tickets, it is set to happen. Lately, Mom has been speaking of a discomfort in her groin area, and an ever-growing lump that is there. I have seen the lump, and am wondering why her doctors do not do something more than nothing. My sister-in-law, Lucy, has taken it upon herself to be the gopher and go-between for Mom, her doctor appointments, and the news to the family, and she states that she is pressing for something to be done.

Despite all the factors thrown in that could possibly complicate our trip to Washington, the dates are set, payments are made, but Mom cannot go. Doctors are now talking of absolutely no air travel, and certainly no walking about. More tests on certain dates must be kept. This is the first of the talk of looking for cancer. I really don't want to hear it. I speak with my kin. I don't know what to do. Since I cannot change plans, I take my children on the trip. In spite of the desire to have taken my mom in the first place, and my unhappiness over her inability to go, my children, Monica and Darlene, and I enjoy ourselves tremendously. It is a marvelous trip after all. The camaraderie of mother and daughters is warm and good. My first inkling of what is to come, the sadness of loss, is now stirring in me as I look at and

realize my love for my own children and the delight one can derive from a child's laughter. Full grown, a child is still your child. I am enjoying myself, and I am keeping myself from thinking doomsday thoughts concerning my mom. Don't want to hear about it. This is late October. Washington, D.C., is growing cold. They say snow by the end of the week. Mom's doctors had stated no cold weather. We arrive home and sure enough, snow comes by the end of the week.

The doctor's are making no sense to me. First they say this; then they say that. I am unhappy with her care. But, Mom does not seem to be unhappy with it at all. They speak of operating on an out patient situation to remove the lump, and everybody seems to feel that this is the next step, and so it is.

Late in November, the operation takes place. Results are back, and the lump is malignant. The doctors say they got it all. But, they will continue to do more tests. They speak of melanoma. This type of cancer is exactly what felled my dad. I begin to have anxiety, and more anxiety, and more anxiety. Why so many tests? What doctor this week, and what doctor next week? On and on and on. My family and I are talking now of what we don't want to address. None of us are liking our family meetings. Liking even less the subject matter. Mom is now starting to make occasional statements with the opening lines of, "If something happens to me, I want you to..."

Sometime during this winter, my first tears begin to fall. As a woman, I find my emotional release in tears. My husband, Donnie, who has walked a thousand miles with me so far in our relationship, takes my hand and tells me that he will always be there to walk the

rest of the way. My siblings and I speak now very frequently. Reality is today. What of tomorrow? One day at a time, they say. Stupid saying, I think, "This is my Mom; I love her dearly." Could we be looking at her time? No! No! I can't bear to think of my life without her. Doesn't anyone know how much this will hurt? It hurts deeply now. What will it be like when the time does come? Ugly thoughts. I refuse to continue to play this horrible thought game of "What If?" Deadly game if the mind. I try to push all negative thoughts aside.

Mom had always had what people call a "special sight." Not quite often a gift of prophecy, but mildly close. She tells me of a dream. Ominous though it is, she tells and I listen. In the dream, my dad came to her, sat down on the bed, and told her, "Within the year, you will join me. Momma, you have cancer. I will come for you when the time is near. Don't resist it when it comes. Don't fight it." As her children, we became accustomed to these dreams of hers; none ever went by the wayside. All that she told did come to pass. I accept the story as gospel, and I now know in my heart that time may truly be growing very short. I return home to Donnie and tell him my story. He sits, silently watching my tearful rendition go to full-blown tears. I call Gary and share the story with him. He, like Donnie, sits and listens silently. As her oldest son, Gary also understands what I am trying to say. He simply replies, "Her dreams do come true."

Christmas is here. Christmas is love, true genuine love. The sounds, the smells, the joy. I believe that I now know the answer to the eternal question: Where does God live? He lives in my Mother's heart. In her crystal blue, beautiful eyes I have seen the depth of



the love of the Savior. We know that this may be the last Christmas with her. She admires my Pavarotti tape; I give it to her. She admires my sweater; I give that too. What gift can I give to her? What gift can I bring?

Mom and I are spending lots of time together. As always, especially in these last several years, we have tried to shop together. She is having a slight trouble walking. One of her greatest loves is to go 'mill around' somewhere. I notice that we are sitting down often these days. Her legs are getting to bug her. We talk. We have always talked very deeply and conspiratorially. I am a confidante to be sure. We plot, we share, we laugh, we look back lots these days. Lots. I love her. She tells me how she loves me. A mother who loves her daughter and a daughter who loves her mother.

January. February. March. The story is ongoing. This doctor, that doctor. Now here we are, April. The last door, the oncologist. Her discomfort is more often there than not there. We ask about her pain. "No, not really" is her standard reply. How are you today? "Oh, fine." Always very happy, always very sweet, always delightful. I like this guy, this doctor. Mom likes him too. She hates the appointments because of all the tests. They have looked in, out and around. She likes him, but no more tests please. Just a couple more. Well, maybe one more and then I've had enough.

Mom and I have taken vacations together many times. Her favorite places are the beautiful islands of Hawaii. We begin to plan another trip. Not that we do much, we really don't, it's just that it's our time and we enjoy our time together there. When do you think? Well, don't we always go in May? Sure, we'll go in May. In our times of traveling together, I have found it much easier to go at her pace as she cannot go at mine. I acquiesce to her and we take our time getting to wherever we go and sit around and look and talk.



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The phone call that I receive this night is not one that I ever wanted to listen to. Gary calls about 8 o'clock. After some nice, warm chatter, he slowly works into the point of his call. You know the trip to Hawaii you and Mom are talking about? Yes, what about it? I am going to tell you to go and go now as days are important; if you are to go, then go soon, in the next few weeks. If you put it off, she will not be able to go. I am stunned. I never, ever wanted to hear this. "What are you trying to say?" "Mary, Mom's cancer is terminal. It is everywhere. Every organ tested so far is involved. Melanoma. She won't make Christmas. May not make Thanksgiving." By the end of the conversation I am almost out of control. I want to run, but to where? I want to scream, but to whom would I scream? I cry and I cry and I cry. God bless Donnie, where does he get his strength? Give some to me, I have none. "Does mom know?" "Of course she knows. She's known all along." "Gary, what will we do? How can we get through this?" "We will get through this, we must. She is our mother." I've never hurt so bad, felt such agony in all my life. What's important now is to put our feelings aside. If we have been given such a short time, then we must make the best use of it as we possibly can. Family meeting Sunday at Zobe's, my brother Don.

We discuss what is to come. We all saw it with Dad. But the big difference here is that mom took care of dad. We were her support. That was her husband. They had 57 years together and we children and family members realized that this time was important to us to be sure but to them, to Mom and Dad, it was the end of a love story that covered over half a century. We gave to her all the time that she wanted. We saw Dad

when we wished to, but to her we always gave way. She provided 90% of the care. We stood by and watched our mother care for our father, her husband, as she wished to, and we watched her bid him goodbye in their fashion. To describe this beautiful ending would take pages, a story told most often in romantic novels, the passing of a king attended by his queen. Lucky man he, our father, in his last moments on this earth, his heart held so tenderly by this lovely woman who bid him his last loving goodbye and released him from all that his heaven-bound soul held tied to. Is this what we can do? How can we do for her what she did for him? We will do this and we will make her last days the most beautiful possible. Our mother deserves the merit of the loveliest life that we can provide. And we will do this.

May. A true horror. Donnie has emergency open-heart surgery. The odds, 50-50. I am on the verge of hysteria. I find it impossible to cry. I am in a state of being, of no emotion. My children ever close to hysteria themselves. I am terrified that he will leave me forever. I vow not to cry. I am still amazed at my fortitude. I am more amazed at his. Strength. How do you command more strength? My work is failing rapidly. I almost don't care about it, but care I must. But I don't. Where will I get more endurance, more strength? My world collapsing around me. "I will be your God through all your lifetime, yes even when your hair is white with age. I made you and I will care for you. I will carry you along and be your Savior"- I pray to my God in this hour of my greatest need. Help me, oh help me please. I find the strength that I need. I don't know how to say that I could have come by it any other way. I pray, maybe not as often as a church-

going person perhaps would. I give thanks for all that I have. I try not to ask for tangible things myself. I pray for others that their way be made easier. I pray for answers to things that I need help with, but I can't say that I have ever got down on my knees and begged for help from my God like I do this time.

End of May, Donnie comes home from the hospital and off mom and I go to Hawaii. My brother Richard picks us up at Mom's in the early morning and takes us to LAX airport. He insists on driving us. On the flight over, Mom has problems with her legs. She says that they ache. She takes aspirin, Tylenol, Motrin, everything she has. Takes the edge off, but the ache always comes back. I had taken some Fiorinal/Codiene with me just in case. Good thing that I did, and luckily had plenty to give to her. This is the beginning of the pain medication. It gives her relief and allows her to walk and sleep comfortably. It also makes her really chatty and apparently gives her a sense of well-being. We stay on Oahu. I had rented a room at the top of a hotel overlooking Waikiki. Our first afternoon there, it rains very softly and shortly thereafter came a sight I have never seen before, a triple rainbow. We both comment on this being a first for the both of us. This trip was to be our last one, and we both know it. Our time together is so special, a trip for the two of us to share as we always did - our secrets, our funny stories, to laugh together, to walk down memory lane one more time, to share a soft cry and a promise to love one another forever, and of course to meet again one day, in another place and in another time. For two women to be in this beautiful place, made all the more poignant because of our reason for coming, has to be called idyllic. We go

again one more time to the USS Arizona. Mom wants a flag that was flown on its bow. We get her one. We spend time with a nephew who lives there. I rent a car, we buy shirts alike, we go to the north shore of Oahu and sit and look out over the sea, eat our picnic lunch, and recount our other trips there. Four, or has it been five? We sit often on the beaches, look out of our balcony at Diamond Head, and, since we face east, saw the sunrise every morning. Matter of fact, we arose at about 4:30 every morning in order to have coffee and watch the sun come up. And we spoke of what was to come. Mom asks several things of me, things that I am to do, things for me to do before and after her death. We speak of death. We speak of life, of all that this life has been to her. She thanks me for being a caring, loving daughter. I just about can't listen to it all, but listen I do. I thank her for being such a wonderful mother, someone that loved me so much in my life. Is there anything that matches a mother's love? I don't know what it could be if there is such a thing.

Our trip was over. We began the journey back, back to the inevitable. It begins to rain, the soft Hawaiian rain. At the airport everyone is so happy, laughing; I envy them all their joy. In the air, she looks out the window and thanks me for the trip, the opportunity to see Hawaii this one last time. She says that this trip has meant a lot to her. My heart is breaking on the way back as her pain, perhaps triggered by the altitude, begins to be much worse once we are in the air. I gave her the last of the pills that I have.

Everything now seems so foreboding, to have such a finality to it, to have on meaning, to have a newfound place, to touch my heart. I begin to feel lost as a small child does, fearful of what is to

come, knowing full well what is to come, hoping against hope that it won't be painful. Not like we watched Dad suffer. Not Mom. How could she withstand the agony to come? Why would she have to withstand such horror? Some things do not seem fair. This certainly isn't seeming fair.

It is warm and pleasant when we land in California. Richard picks us up at the airport. He is such a wonderful son. He loves his mother so much. It's easy to see. She is happy to see him. Their embrace was genuine. Lucky guy, to be loved so much by someone so special. The month is now June.

Family meeting at Richard's. Doctors have said that the pain medication can be given freely, and indicate that she may have whatever she needs in whatever amounts. Keep her as comfortable as possible. Hospice has come to call.

We agree that now she may not spend her time alone. Who is to stay with her? I volunteer. I state that I will stay with her for as long as it takes, and I will see her out. Everyone tells me that I am the logical one. I know, I know. My work? In trouble. My husband? Thank God that he is alive and surviving without his wife's care. He is a special one, that Donnie. What tasks do we all undertake? Who is to do what? Dates are set. Hospice is there to help us. We'll all help. I will stay. I choose to stay with her alone. Fine. It will be hard for you Mary. I know, I know. I can do it. I want to do it. I must do it. I feel that I must. I will do it.

Mid June I move in. I last five days. I can't do it. I'm horrified that I don't have the strength. I pray to God, I pray and beg, give me strength. It's not there, not this time. My mother is having fearful bouts of pain. The medications are making her throw up everything and everywhere. She has lost her bowels so

many times. I'm washing everything and can't keep up. Her pain is hitting her full force some days. When it hits her, it hits me. Every day, I am vomiting from despair, from nerves. My work, I am trying to do some on the phone. Impossible. I know that I shall be fired. I care. I must work. But I don't care. Everyone in this family calls. The phone rings all the time. People outside the family drop by without calling. Makes me mad. I have enough to do to try to care for mom without anyone stopping by at an embarrassing time for her. I lie in bed with her and I am shell-shocked. She asks what is wrong? I begin to cry, she comforts me and pats my head and draws me near. I fall asleep. My family walks in. The scene is somewhat of a tragic comedy. Here the keeper has gone to hell in a hand basket, and the person requiring the care, the one who is dying of cancer, is caring for the keeper. My family fires me. Donnie welcomes me home with caresses; I need all that anyone can give. I go to sleep for 16 hours. I am exhausted. Completely exhausted.

Family emergency meeting. The decision is that we will all share in her time. We set down a calendar of schedules. Who can today, tomorrow, tonight, tomorrow night, on and on. During this time, mom vacillates from the pain. Some days it's unstoppable, some days are better. There are no good days anymore. She still, through all of this, tries to be pleasant. She smiles as much as possible. She wants to walk, to sit outside. She tries to eat. Sometimes there is an appetite, most days not. We have been keeping an ongoing log of her medications and her state of being. Now it is vitally important that this log be kept completely accurate. We rotate shifts with each other. Mom speaks to us with deliberate, soft tones. She is telling us important last things now. All of us. I can't

stand it. I cry so easily. I am so upset. I don't know what I know. I don't know what else to do. I'm a wreck. During this time, I manage to gain 25 pounds. I eat anything and don't even taste it. Funny thing is, we are all eating. The whole family. We talk, we share a meal, we comfort each other. How is mom today? How are you holding up? What do you think? Well, what do you think? Chin up, stay strong, you must stay strong.

Mom's sleep now comes any time. Day and night mean nothing. It is July. Doctor says soon. Soon? What's soon? She's in agony now, how much more must she suffer? Her weight has plummeted from 130 to 105 in just a few short weeks. Gary does not weigh her any more, no point. She's probably well below 100 pounds now. We try to get her to eat. We think we are doing her a favor. As long as one eats, one will get strength and get better, right? Wrong. When I am with her, I play my tapes very softly. They are New Age, and very, very restful and relaxing. In the beginning, I read to her. The Bible, the paper, whatever she wants. I always do her hair, and apply what small amount of make up that she wears. She is always very presentable by 7:30 to 8:00 in the morning. We keep the house nice, change the bed linens every day, do all the household chores, and cook a full meal due to the influx of family that would come around. Mom wants a respectable order kept to her house, and we do our best. By all means, we keep her dignity. Always. That is the first order of the day. We, of course, set about to undertake this our last job for her, with determination. We never, never waiver either. We always see that she has earrings in, outfits matched, light cologne. Perfect, as she would have done for herself. What more can we do? Feelings of complete

hopelessness. What more can we do?

August 1991. Mom has said no more visitors other than family. Time is growing shorter, and we all know it too well. Hospital bed has been here a week, week and a half. Hospice is on call anytime and drops in every other day. They are wonderful. A woman comes by to help mom take a bath. It's now baths in bed. She seems to prefer this woman, Frances, to our bathing her. And the morphine. The pain is out of control most times. Nothing else to give. This is the last stop. Give her what she needs. Whenever. We request an i.v. that will administer small constant amounts so that the pain does not get the better of her. Keeping it at bay, if it can. Through all of this, a remarkable thing, a transformation is starting to appear. Mom has developed a very rosy-cheeked look about her. She has taken upon herself a look of serenity. She is very, very calm. We have put ceramic angels in her room to gaze down upon her. The minister has come many times and has given her blessings and prayers. The very soft music plays ever so lightly. She is sleeping almost always now. The stages of impending death are apparent. What we have been told to expect is happening. The final acceptance. The deepening slumber. The peaceable calm. We are all grabbing at time now. We give one day and one night. Then another one day and one night. We are taking turns so that no one is left out. I wish to stay alone this night. It is the night of what I shall call the visitation.

The events of this night are impossible to convey completely. To not despoil my own, very private memories, I will recount some, but not all. To be on the cusp of this life passing and to be nearer to the next life, to be privy to what is taking place, I can only say that I feel a tremendous awe of what I witness. To have a

glimpse, to have just shared a glimpse is on of the most remarkable events in my life. I shall try to explain.

My father came this evening. Making himself know only to her. Not to me. Mom could not understand that I could not see him too. She conversed with him, but seemingly listened constantly. What he had to say was very calming to her. The angels who came made themselves known by their enormous size and their massive number. It was as though the walls were no longer there. Mom asked me if I had ever seen such a sight. Look at them all, was her statement several times. And look at how big the angels are and look at the size of their wings. This was the gist of the entire night. I would say that this visitation lasted three or four hours. Hallucinations? Perhaps. A true visit from the realm of the next? I think so. My mother was always a true believer in her God. A more sincere person I have not met. Her place in the realm of heaven was always secured. This was a most amazing experience for me. I don't know how many other people who have participated in the last days or hours of a loved one's death could share or have shared in something like this. I will say again that I was transfixed the entire night, lost in timely space with her, the joy that shone from her eyes, the light that shown so brightly this one last time, that anticipation of what was to come next. I would not have been surprised if she would have chosen to leave me this night.

The next day, Gary and Mike come about noon. As I am getting ready to go home for the day so that I can sleep, Mom asks for me privately. She tells me goodbye and that it is to be soon. What grip that I had on this leaves me com-

pletely. If you feel that you are getting an upper hand on what is to be, don't believe it. Reality is, this is her goodbye. I know it all too well. The searing sorrow, the pain the despair, the agony, the hurt, whatever name you give to this emotion is overwhelming when it comes to you. This is you. Not your neighbor or your friend, this is you and your mom. Leaving you. You'll not see her again in this life. Reality. Reality. Reality. Your mom is dying, now.

On August the 27th, we kids – Betty; Gary and Mike; Richard and Judy; Don and Lucy; Donnie and I – Mom's brother and his wife, and Mom's sister all come to the house on Hersholt Street in Lakewood, California, and we all bid her goodbye. The sorrow that pervades this house is incredible. Everyone is upset but Mom. She lies in her bed very peaceful, very calm, very serene. What else to say? There is no comfort at this time. It is happening and it is happening now. It can't be stopped. We did our job. We accomplished what we had set out to do. We made her last days on earth as peaceful and as full of love as we possibly could. We made her transition as beautiful as we knew how. We love our mother as fiercely as small children love theirs. We tried to give back to her the love that she had so unselfishly given to us, to each and every one of us. She, in her last days, has spoken so sweetly and softly to each one of us. In approaching her death she took time to give her love to us; her last acts were the epitome of a dear, dear, wonderful mom. We all have our own special memories as we all had our own special time.

You must not have regrets. I have none. My mother, (as was said in her eulogy) was not a hard act to follow; she was an impossible act to follow. I loved her. She loved me. That's all that I

know. I am so very lucky to have been a daughter to someone who was so lovely in spirit.

On this evening, the night so quiet and still. August 27th, 1991, a day that will be forever etched in my mind. Mom died at 11:10 p.m. Very silently slipping off to her forever.

She lived her life for this last moment, the glory of it all now known to her. I pray to our God that her eternity is all that she had wished it to be.

She came into this world in May 5, 1910, and returned back 81 years later. Her life's work very well done.

This whole time was a true trial of human tenacity. We did it, and we're glad that we did. We Anderson kids and spouses are a determined lot. I don't know how many people are prepared for a death at home, especially a cancer death. The pain for the one who is dying is incredible to be sure, but the emotional pain for those left behind is immeasurable. When you think that this is as far as it will go, it just becomes greater.

Night and day did not exist in time as we commonly recognize it. It is overwhelmingly exhausting for the caregivers. My story is short, and all of the emotions are not all here. Neither all of the days. Mom's discomfort initially began ten months prior to her death. Her cancer had been there for how long? Who knows? The agony for her lasted three months and day by day increased.

What advice can I give? Only one. **Make the most of the lucid time that you have. A lifetime can be slipping past you.** Have no regrets. Say what you have to say, or do what you have to do, time allowing. Loving someone immensely is all it is. Don't let the precious moments of time pass. You may never have the opportunity again.

When death finally comes, you feel the void. I can best describe it as a huge, black, vacant void. Loss. Complete and total. There is nothing that can fill that area. It's empty. The emptiness, this void, is equal to your deep, abiding sorrow. I did not believe that time would be any ally, but time is a healer. Lots of time. It has helped me to write my story.

Now when I hear Hawaiian music or find myself gazing at the moon, things that once were shared by her and me, they bring back special time, back to when and where it once was. There was at first only abject sorrow that would accompany these memories, and now I realize that these memories are mine and mine alone; now more often than not, I find myself sharing an inner smile and enjoying her love even more.

When it is your time to understand, then I hope that this has helped. □

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