

THE OLD ONES

They opened the door just before sunset. He came out first, then she. He planted his walker solidly on the open walkway. He turned and shuffled as he moved the walker ahead of him a few inches at a time. She locked the door. "Do you have your keys?" she asked. He said nothing, but just kept on shuffling for the elevator. She paused and waited before starting the short walk to the elevator. She knew it would take him time to get there.

Once, he stopped and asked if she had the stuff. She held up the plastic shopping bag. He continued his shuffle. She joined him at the elevator. He pushed the button. The grinding of the gears and the purring of the motor could be heard. He could not hear it. He had left his hearing aids on the table.

The door opened. She held the safety as he shuffled in. No one else was on the elevator. This suited him. The door opened again on the ground floor. "Do you have your keys?" she asked him again. He grunted and held them up for her to see. She couldn't see them very well. Her eyesight was poor. Moving at a snail's pace, they walked and shuffled toward the car.

"Careful, don't drop them now," he told himself. He unlocked the driver's door and punched the electric lock. She opened the door on the other side. He struggled to get into the driver's seat. The walker stood outside his door. She came around and put it into the back seat. He scowled, but she couldn't see his scowl.

She returned to the passenger's side, got in, closed the door, and put on her seat belt. He turned to her and said. "Are you in, babe?" He started the car and slowly backed out of the parking space. He did not hear the car beep behind him. Both hands fixed firmly on the steering wheel, he drove slowly out the long entrance from their condo. At each stop sign, he stopped ten feet back before creeping into the intersection. He turned toward the setting sun. She complained that it was too bright. He did not hear her.

Fifteen stoplights later, he turned onto the road that paralleled the beach. The daylight lingered, but the sun was no longer visible. At the beach front park, he parked the car facing the low sand dune that sheltered the parking lot from the beach. He turned off the motor. She had put her power window down a little. He turned the ignition key and jabbed the window control button on his side, closing the window.

"Do you have the stuff?" he asked. She dug into the shopping bag for the envelope and a bottle of water. She pulled out two Styrofoam cups and a straw for him. He took the envelope and tore it open. He poured the assortment of tablets into the palm of his hand. He had been studying the medicines for a long time. He knew which ones were more deadly than the others. For a long time, he had been setting a pill aside, now and then, skipping over his usual dosage of medications. This collection of pills had taken almost three months to accumulate. She poured the water into the two cups. He handed her half

of the pills.

“These are enough?” she asked. He began a long tirade about the chemical analysis of each pill and its capabilities of killing when in the proper amounts. She shook her head. She didn’t really want to hear what he was saying. It did no good to talk to him. He had set his mind and hers, so he thought, on the course of action they were going to take. He rechecked the lights and the door locks. Assured that they would not be disturbed, he began to sip the water through the straw and take pill after pill.

He looked at her. She was still looking at the pills in her hand. “Are you all right, baby doll?” he asked. She nodded, took one tablet, and drank some water. He returned to his task of consuming the pill hoard. She let one pill drop to the floor and sipped some more water. He did not notice. She continued on in the same manner for the next few minutes.

He finished his pills and handed her his cup and straw. She put it away neatly. She popped the last two tablets into her mouth as she bent over to put the plastic shopping bag back on the floor. The pills dropped unseen into the bag from her open mouth. She swallowed the last of her water and placed her cup also in the bag.

He reached over and took her hand. “I love you, babe.” Within a few minutes, he was unconscious. She pried his grip from her hand. She unlocked the door and watched for a movement from him. There was none. Cautiously, she opened the door. The dome light revealed his head resting back on the seat, seemingly asleep. She slipped out the door and closed it as softly as possible. The sea birds cried on the wind.

She walked to the beach. It was cool since the sun had set. She pulled her sweater around her and hugged herself with her arms. On one of the walkovers that protected the dunes, she sat on the bottom step and cried. The incoming waves covered the sounds of her voice. She wondered how long she would have to wait before someone discovered him in the car. He had chosen this spot for its isolation. Maybe she would have to wait until morning. She didn’t know if she could last that long. She hurt so much. She felt like her heart was going to burst. She hoped the one tablet she had consumed would do nothing to harm her. She continued her anguished wail.

The sun was just beginning to show above the horizon when the jogger spotted her form propped against a step. He jogged to her side. Her mouth hung open. Her eyes were closed. He touched her and she fell over on her side. He dropped to her side. She was breathing but unconscious. He wrapped his wind-breaker around her frail body. Hoisting her gently in her arms, he crossed the walkover. A car was parked not too far away. He thought he saw someone in it and called out “help”. The figure in the car did not move. He turned to the road and waved down an oncoming car. The car sped away.

The next car stopped. “I have a car phone,” said the driver. While the jogger placed the unconscious woman into the car, the driver gave his location to the “911” operator. The jogger indicated that she was alive but probably not for long. Other cars stopped. A nurse stepped up and asked if she could help. The two men nodded. Someone asked

about the person over in the parked car. The jogger just shrugged his shoulders.

The police and an ambulance arrived simultaneously. The ambulance sped away with the frail woman. At the hospital, she lingered an hour before passing on from exposure and age.

The policeman tapped on the windshield of the parked car. He was unable to arouse the man inside. Someone noticed the passenger door was unlocked. The officer saw the scattered pills on the floor as he reached in. An involuntary shudder went through him as he touched the rigid body. Pulling back, the officer said, "The man is dead."

Their obituary said they had been married 60 years.

The Leftovers

Shocked by their planned and unplanned deaths, we left them with the undertaker. My sisters, brother and I went to their condominium. Sharon, the oldest, said it would be easier for us to settle the estate if we sold their condo. We all nodded in agreement. Once inside, we fanned out like billiard balls being scattered in the opening shot. A oneness of purpose bonded us as we opened and closed drawers, set certain things in piles, and began to pack our parents' lifetime into boxes.

"Look!" cried Sandy. She held up a piece of notebook paper with our father's characteristic scrawl. His hearing aids flew to the end of the table and onto the floor. Silently, one by one, we read the sheet of paper. The heaviness of the communication held us all in bondage. Sharon read it last. Then, with deliberation, she spit her gum onto the middle of the paper. She folded it over several times before wadding and stuffing it into a black trash bag. No one felt it necessary to comment about what was written on that paper. The few seconds we each looked at it were enough to burn its meaning into our hearts forever.

A light tap at the open door and a cheery "Hello" broke the intensity of the moment. Gilda Hovis, the neighbor two doors down, came into the condo. We all knew Gilda from previous visits. She began babbling about how strange but wonderful it was that our parents had died at the same time. Spying the teapot on the stove, she exclaimed, "Why, just last Monday, your mother and I had a little tea party on her patio. It is hard to believe that she is gone so quickly." Seeing the soiled tea cups in the sink, she continued, "Those are the tea cups we used. She didn't even get to wash them."

Carla, who was clearing the kitchen, snatched the well-used, stained teapot from the stove and thrust it into Gilda's hands. I picked up the cups and saucers from the sink, placed them in a plastic bag, and put the bag into Gilda's protesting hand. As she clutched them to her, she said, "Oh, no, I couldn't. They belong to you now." She continued to protest as John escorted her to the door, closing it firmly behind her.

It was her parting remark that stung us all. “You know, they were married over sixty years.”

Copyright 1996 Penny S. Hession

By whose authority do people of any age end their own lives, whether assisted by a physician or not?