

Breathing for Elaine

by Jan Groft, *Central PA Magazine*, August 1998

It is a scorcher of a Sunday in July, a day when the air barely budes but hangs heavy around my shoulder. I have taken to noticing things like air, the act of breathing. This is what happens when you learn your best friend is dying. Your perspective shifts. Your viewpoint, in dizzifying motion, turns upside down, so the things that once seemed urgent—a project deadline, a presentation—slip out of focus, suddenly deemed inconsequential, and things once taken for granted, such as the air that we breathe, loom paramount.

I dial Elaine's number knowing she is alone. Our husbands are golfing, and Valarie, her 16-year-old, my own daughter's closest friend, is working the check-out at Giant. Typically I don't subscribe to lying, but this, too, has twisted on itself.

"Elaine, I have something to drop off," I say. "It'll just take a minute, then I've got to get to the office." I have no intention of going to the office, but I can't risk her saying she's too tired for company. Selfishly, I want to be with her.

"Door's open," she says.

Buzz, a high-anxiety cocker spaniel, greets me barking and nips at my shins.

"Buzz, get down!" Elaine's voice used to be laced with laughter. Now she gasps for air as she speaks. Still dressed in her church clothes, in stocking feet, she sits propped against a quilted pillow on the sofa. Her dress is a print of autumn-colored flowers. Its gathered waist is hiked above her bloated stomach. She wears a wig of ashen brown, though previously her hair was dark brown, and before that, blonde. Once it even turned purple, which had her scurrying back to the hairdresser, only to be endowed with an interim shade of green.

The gift I've brought is my latest attempt at the most elusive of all gifts: time. They are certificates for three house cleanings from a local service. I hope they'll give her time with her family or, at least, save her the anxiety of sitting by helplessly as Joe and Valarie assume the housework. Until now, Elaine has been totally unrehearsed in helplessness, wouldn't have even known how to fake it.

She smiles and sets the certificates on the coffee table. Immediately my stomach sinks. My idiocy in thinking I could do anything of substance for my friend embarrasses me. The truth is—though I don't yet know this truth—there are not enough days left in Elaine's life for her to use even one of the certificates.

"The cancer has spread everywhere." She sounds informative, like a reporter with laryngitis delivering the six o'clock news. "You ought to see the x-rays. It looks like someone's thrown handfuls of sand that have landed all over my lungs." The cancer has traveled from her uterus through the bloodstream; her left lung is totally inoperable.

"Oh, Elaine," I say, swallowing my tears. I don't want her to think I'm giving up.

"You know, I keep wondering why. I'm thinking maybe there's something God is trying to tell me." She wheezes and coughs. Her voice is raspy like a woman of 70, though she is only 43. I feel guilty that by talking to me, she's using up her breath when there is so little of it.

"At first, I thought He was trying to tell me I spend too much time working," she says. Recently elected president of the Lancaster Board of Realtors, Elaine runs a realty office. "I do work hard, but I've never neglected my family."

"No, never," I agree. The notion of Elaine neglecting her family is so far-fetched that it makes my

heart ache to ponder this.

“Then I thought maybe He’s trying to tell me that we live too extravagantly. We do live well, but certainly not beyond our means.” She glances out the sliding glass door to a patio in the back of the home she and Joe have recently built. They are trying to sell their home so they can move to a smaller, more manageable one—part of Elaine’s endeavor to organize the details before she goes.

“Then I was reading the Bible. I started seeing discrepancies between the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church and the writings of the Bible, and I thought, ‘That’s it! That’s what God is trying to tell me; I’m in the wrong religion!’ The coronation of saints—it’s not even in the Bible, you know?”

I concentrate on every word, trying to follow her thinking, and finally I nod in agreement because she is breathless, and I can’t bear the thought of her wasting breath explaining something I probably wouldn’t understand anyway. She seems to be traveling on an island of deep-rooted foliage, incomprehensible to those of us who haven’t arrived there. She elaborates on her mission to find a new church. So far, she and Joe have celebrated with the Lutherans, the Methodists and, today, they attended St. Thomas Episcopal. Now she thinks she is on to something. Desperate for her to try anything, I find myself hoping she is right.

The telephone rings, and I jump to answer it. It’s an agent with prospects interested in seeing the house. Elaine shakes her head no, the house is a mess. I clap my hand over the mouthpiece.

“Let them come,” I say. “You want to sell the house, don’t you?”

“Not looking like this, I don’t.” I’m not exactly sure if she means the house or herself. Her skin seems a size too small for her cheekbones; her ash brown wig glistens with sweat, particularly around the bangs.

“I’ll clean up,” I assert. Even after 11 months of her illness, the oddity of my taking charge in her well-run house is still apparent to both of us, but finally she agrees.

“Glass Plus is under the sink,” she says. “And the socks on the dryer—just shove those inside.”

I trip on a plastic pork chop and kick it for Buzz to fetch.

“Save your breath,” I say. “I know how to clean a house.” Both of us know this is not entirely true. Housekeeping—especially in short order—is not one of my strong points. But I march toward the broom closet filled with a sense of purpose; I am about to scrub my best friend’s toilet bowls.

On my way up the stairs, I notice an index card taped to the plastic doorbell box. In Elaine’s neat printing are the words: Select your doorbell chime from a menu of 24 tunes. Down the hall, Elaine’s selling aids point the way to the laundry chute, the storage space, the rheostat dimmer for the recessed lights. Her presence throughout the house is almost too much to bear—her paisley shorts on the bedroom doorknob, the oxygen tank in the master bath, and in the sewing room, three marked-down gowns she bought in anticipation of Valarie’s high school proms.

I open the closet door to hang Elaine’s nightgown, but all I see are Joe’s shirts and jackets. This sets me into a panic: My God, where are Elaine’s clothes? I shut the door, stash the nightgown into a drawer, then quickly run the vacuum. By the time I return to the family room, Elaine has orchestrated the showing.

“When they arrive,” she says, her voice barely audible, “I’ll hold Buzz here on his leash. You answer the door, then come back and take Buzz outside.”

Elaine is one of the only people I know who makes me view myself as laid back. I put my hands on my hips and start tapping my foot. We both know why I am giving her this look and start to laugh. We

are interrupted by the doorbell, and I notice the doorbell tune Elaine has chosen. It is rich and vibrant, beautifully synchronized.

Outside, Buzz engages me in a tug-of-war. I yank at his leash. My feet stick to my leather sandals. My bangs frizz at my sweating brow, but I hold onto the leash with both hands. Buzz yanks back, he jerks, he coaxes me past newly seeded lawns, sparsely landscaped, where houses still under construction are half-dressed with siding. The smell of fresh tar stings my nostrils.

Stupid dog, I'm saying aloud. Buzz is running now, which means I'm running, too. I don't want to run. I feel like killing this dog.

"Stop it!" I scream. But Buzz prances into a neighbor's yard, drags me through a rose garden, then stops abruptly at a hedge of young azaleas. At the other end of the leash, I imagine myself sailing over the bushes and crashing through the neighbors' picture window. Buzz lifts his leg. And I begin to cry. I am crying so hard that my shoulders are shaking, and I imagine all of Elaine's neighbors peering out their windows at me sobbing and at this idiot dog peeing on someone's thirsty red azaleas.

Finally, like vagabonds, Buzz and I lumber back to Elaine's patio. There is no way to fight the heat, no trees mature enough to shade us. I overhear Elaine straining her voice, telling the prospects about the helpful neighbors, the block parties, the covered-dish picnic planned for Labor Day. I inhale deeply, then exhale, breathing for Elaine, wishing she would stop wasting breath on these people we don't even know.

The woman, who is too stern-looking to live in my friend's house, walks onto the patio, leaving her husband and the agent inside with Elaine. Her white-long-sleeved blouse is buttoned to the neck even in this 90-degree temperature. She nods at me, cups her hand halfway over her mouth and whispers confidentially.

"Your mother," she asks. "How long's she been sick?"

Later, an early evening breeze whispers through the screens. Elaine's brown eyes are starting to glaze. It's time to head home though I hate the thought of leaving her.

"Can I get you anything before I go?" I ask.

"My wig stand," she says. Since the chemo kicked in, and even since she insisted on stopping it about a month ago, I've never seen her without the wig, her remaining shred of dignity, I suppose. Elaine's forehead glistens with sweat, and I figure as soon as I leave, she'll remove the wig. But when I return with the stand, she's sitting with the ash brown locks in one hand, and with the other, she is scrubbing a napkin across her own sparse crop of hair. I stop and gaze at my friend.

"You're beautiful," I say, half-whispering. And she is, her fully exposed ears so delicate, her hair so crimson-brown, that this time I am the one who is breathless.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jan Groft is the author of the award-winning book *As We Grieve* and a memoir, *Riding the Dog*