

When Gratitude Holds Hands with Grief by Elaine Mansfield

“He’s conscious,” the nurse says. I trust this Vietnam vet with his acne scarred face and tender resigned heart. His sad eyes help me face what’s coming. The two of us stand next to a bed in the oncology unit of Strong Hospital and look over my husband Vic’s limp body.

“He can hear you,” the nurse says, “but he’s too exhausted to respond. You can ask him to squeeze your hand.”

Yes, I could ask Vic to squeeze my hand if he loves me. But I don’t doubt his love. I can ask him to squeeze if he hears me, but he doesn’t need to hear me. He needs to die, so I don’t call him back to life and to me, but let him stay with the hard labor of breathing. I touch him and inhale his scent, rub oil into his hands and feet, and pray for strength to let him go. I’ve walked with him to the threshold of death and hung my feet over the ledge. I feel the vastness of the abyss, but I can go no further.

For two years, I tried to save him. We both tried, but there are no more escape routes. After years of struggle, his gentle passage opens my heart and stills my mind. This quiet death is his last gift to me, even as I weep and whisper my goodbyes. Just after midnight, he exhales. I wait for an inhalation that does not come.

I don’t know how to live without this man. I depend on his brown eyes beaming at me. For forty two years we loved each other, meditated together, transformed our land, raised our sons, and shared our dreams and sorrows. I don’t know who I am without him.

My friends and I sit with his body for six hours. When an orderly arrives, a loving nurse helps me shroud Vic in clean white sheets and slide his body into the body bag.

We take the elevator down and walk toward the hospital lobby, shading our eyes from the sun glaring through the floor-to-ceiling windows. People scurry, grasping coffee cups, pushing to punch in before 7 a.m. They are serious and self-absorbed, their eyes averted. They seem to be behind a glass wall, in another world, on the side of the living, while I stand on a threshold where death feels closer than life.

We find my Subaru in the parking garage and stack Vic’s clothes and laptop on the backseat. Lingered, we stand in a helpless clump, softened by the mystery of death we just witnessed. It’s not enough to hug and thank these generous friends for accompanying me on this journey, but it’s all I have to give.

“Are you OK to drive?” Anthony asks.

“Yes,” I answer. “Follow me.”

I steer down the parking garage ramp, driving slowly so Anthony can catch up in his rental car. I stop at the parking attendant’s glass-windowed booth. My body knows how to count money and pay the parking fee.

I’m a stranger, just returned from the underworld. I’ve seen death, raw and unstoppable, and understand that my own death is not a distant thing.

Anthony drives toward home in the slow lane on the New York State Thruway. We travel over the foreign soil of this world, strangers to the usual concerns of the day.

How is it possible to feel such deep sorrow and deep gratitude at the same time?