

Medicine and Memories

By Elaine Mansfield

Elaine's husband, Vic, died in June 2008. She wrote this essay on September 24, 2008, three and a half months after his death.

Yesterday I completed a chore I meant to finish in June. It only took a few hours, but it was mined with deep ravines and jagged edges. I had avoided it for three months.

Like many others who have lost someone close, it was my job to sort through my husband's belongings. Sometimes it helped to do this with a friend or one of our sons, but often I found myself overcome with a desire to clear, discard, or give away without having planned ahead. I boxed and bagged my husband's possessions and let them sit in a closet for a few days or weeks before taking them to the Salvation Army, offering them to friends, or sending them to the dump. I didn't want to be hasty and later regret discarding some favorite item. I began the sorting process with replaceable items like clothing and toiletries, leaving the more precious and creative things such as photographs for a calmer time. The sorting and discarding process had its own pace. Objectively, there was no hurry, but I was impatient to have the major parts behind me since sorting invariably reopened deep wounds and rekindled sorrow.

Yesterday morning, like most other mornings, I opened the kitchen cabinet to get my vitamins. Facing the array of bottles and pills that had gathered dust since Vic's death in June, I felt an urgent need to sort and toss. I would have worn armor if I had imagined that this would be the day, but I had intended to clear out his medicines many times and managed to put it off. This day, after eating oats and yogurt and half way through my thermos of tea, still in my pajamas with unbrushed teeth, I began pulling the small plastic vials of my husband's prescription medicines off the shelves. I put them on the kitchen counter along with the supplements that I won't use—the ones to relieve swelling and replenish minerals and counteract too much blood thinner. I scraped off the "Victor Mansfield, use as directed" labels and dumped the tiny pills into the garbage—pink circles, bicolor capsules, white ovals of various sizes, blue ones, ones with numbers. One would think these pills could be recycled, but the pharmacist I consulted in June said no. He also said not to flush them into the septic system to avoid contaminating ground water. Just pull off labels and dump in the garbage. I felt virtuous recycling glass jars, but the amber plastic vials went into the garbage with the pills. Unused needles were put aside to take to the hospital for hazardous waste disposal.

Wanting to cut and run, I willed my way down the cellar steps to retrieve what I had stashed there the day after Vic's death. A cardboard box held the plastic pill dispenser that I filled each week and the pills and potions that had resided on the kitchen counter for use "as needed"—pale lilac Ambien that brought stupor more than sleep and white Tylenol with codeine to dull the cough. There were various potencies of prednisone to urge the body toward life, along with red codeine cough syrup and yellow anti-bacterial liquid. How did this happen to us, the ones who rarely took aspirin and grew much of our own organic food?

I was not done. I went to the downstairs bathroom where there were more vials, tubes, and jars filled with pills, liquids, ointments, and salves. I pulled them out of drawers and the medicine cabinet and off shelves, knowing that if they covered the floor, I would have to finish. The history of his illness was in those prescription and over-the-counter medicines that did or did not help with symptoms. I remembered each one and where it came in the procession of events. I remembered what came next when one failed to work. I remembered the decreasing hope attending the last ones prescribed. I remembered how we tried in every small way to keep Vic comfortable and help him live. How we tried every natural solution, whether he believed in it or not. How we tried to avoid this mountain of medication in the beginning, only to succumb in the end. How we tried to help him feel better each day and hold off death until tomorrow.

I finished the job, and the garbage man hauled the medicines away this morning. I did it hoping to clear out illness and make new space for a future life I cannot yet imagine. I did it hoping to clear away illness and open myself to the good memories that came before the last sick years. Like so many other things since Vic's death, the task had felt unbearable, but I had borne it. The medicines were gone and the cabinet shelves were cleaned and ready for new possibilities—one more small triumph in life after Vic.

Elaine Mansfield is a writer, Hospicare volunteer, student of mythology, gardener, and caretaker of 70 acres of protected land. She is also a nutritionist and exercise trainer. She was married for 40 years to Victor Mansfield, until his death in June 2008, and is still sorting through his life.