

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -
--Emily Dickinson, #254*

Feathers of Hope

By Elaine Mansfield

Elaine's husband, Vic, died in June 2008. She wrote this essay on May 18, 2009.

Today is my wedding anniversary. I mark the day alone. Last year, my husband and I spent our fortieth anniversary in the hospital. After a brief prednisone-supported respite from the worst symptoms, he was enduring another cycle of coughing, fever, swelling, and exhaustion. A chest x-ray showed scattered white spots on his lungs. Our local doctor suggested that we go to Strong Hospital in Rochester where Vic had been receiving treatment for lymphoma for two years. He would call Vic's oncologist and arrange for admission.

"This looks like pneumonia, not cancer," the doctor said. He sounded sure.

I knew by then that neither he nor Vic's oncologists understood what was going on in Vic's body. I knew that even if it were pneumonia this time, cancer would never leave him alone. Still, I felt reassured. Pneumonia was presumably treatable, even though Vic's lungs had not responded to the powerful antibiotics he'd been taking for weeks. No matter. Pneumonia sounded better than cancer, so we clung to the possibility.

I drove home on the valley road between Corning and Watkins Glen. Spring-green hillsides shouted out vitality and promise. Vic coughed and gasped in the passenger seat next to me. Reminding myself to breathe, I used my cell phone to ask a friend to pick up our dog. I asked another friend to water the flats of plants I was hardening for the gardens. I called the American Cancer Society Lodge in Rochester to reserve myself a room for the night or the week. Vic handed me his cell phone when it rang. It was the hospital telling us where to report. I made a mental list of what we needed for what I prayed would be a short hospital stay—photo of the Dalai Lama hugging Vic, laptop, pajamas for Vic, clothing for me, Vic's medicine, my vitamins, toothbrushes. Really, I thought, after what we've been through, I should keep a suitcase packed by the front door—a suitcase packed in preparation for death instead of the ones I had packed for birth in 1970 and 1974.

Vic slowly made his way from the car to the house, leaning against a borrowed cane. Between coughing jags, he packed his computer bag and helped gather toiletries. I tore up and down the stairs with as much efficiency as I could muster. Needing to think straight and calm myself for the two-hour drive to Rochester, I stole a few seconds to pause at my bedroom window and look out at the bluebird house.

After packing the car and getting Vic settled, I went back inside for a final check of the house. I walked through the room where Vic slept during his illness, straightened the sheets of the hospital bed, and picked up a few sets of earplugs. Hospitals are noisy. I went into Vic's office, checked to make sure he'd packed his reading glasses, and paused for a long last look through the telescope that focused not on the distant hills or on the moons of Jupiter, but on the round doorway of the bluebird box.

Mr. Bluebird sat on the roof, his blue back shimmering in the afternoon sun. A rusty orange patch of chest feathers arched triumphantly over his white belly as he twisted on his perch to scan the horizon. He was guarding and feeding his mate and their nestlings, the way Vic had always guarded and fed his family.

Two weeks later, I returned home from the hospital with my youngest son. We had left Vic's precious body behind after arranging transport to Ithaca for cremation. No longer in a hurry, I paused to watch the bluebirds through the telescope. The bluebird couple flitted in and out with soft insects, worms, and caterpillars for their nestlings.

Vic's office is now my office. The books on the shelves and the pictures on the walls have changed, but the telescope still focuses on the round door of the bluebird house. In February, I cleaned out the bird box, a chore Vic had always done. At the end of March, the first male bluebirds returned to perch on the railing and check out the real estate. I wanted to call out, "Hey, Vic, the bluebirds are back. Winter will end. Everything will be OK."

This morning, I watch the bluebird family just as I did last spring. The blue boy sits on the roof, a worm in his mouth and his feathers fluttering in the cold morning wind. He hops to the perch below the door, sticks his head inside, drops the worm, and flies away.

The bluebird who rules the box this year is unlikely to be the same as the one who ruled last year. Last year's king is probably dead or deposed by his offspring. Death takes what it will take and ends what it must end, but alongside constant loss and destruction stands the solace of life's exuberant cycles. For a moment, I feel a quiet comfort, a faith that all is as it should be and that life is strong and sure even when death wins a local battle.

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 enjoyed a 40-year marriage with Victor Mansfield until his death in June 2008. Vic, who was an author, student of philosophy and religion, and professor of Physics and Astronomy at Colgate University, is keenly missed by Elaine, his sons and mother, and his students, colleagues, and friends.