

Barbara A. Rouillard

*Air*

“I would like to be the air that inhabits you for a moment only.

I would like to be that unnoticed and that necessary.”

Margaret Atwood, *Variation on the Word Sleep*

My mother rings a small, brass bell when she wakes up in the morning. When I put her to bed, I remind her not to get out of bed without my help. “Promise me that you’ll ring the bell,” is the second to the last thing I say to her each night that I am with her. The last thing I say, after I kiss her goodnight, is *I love you*.

I do not sleep well, haven’t for awhile. I think it is a combination of Covid fatigue—mostly I miss my friends—and knowing that my mother’s death is coming sooner rather than later. Because I am such a light sleeper, I always hear that bell when she rings it.

My mother’s needs and capabilities are rapidly changing and, just recently, she has been complaining about having trouble breathing.

When I hear that bell, I am happy. When I hear that bell, I know two things. One, she is still alive. Two, she remembered my instruction to ring that bell. With the aid of her walker, I get her to the bathroom where I remove and throw away the thick pad from one of the two disposable diapers, and, of course, the two disposable diapers, that she wears to bed. I help her put on a new diaper within which I have placed another thick pad. I help her change into clean pajamas.

Throughout this process, she mumbles how she is having trouble breathing, so, when I help her into the living room, I wrap a thick blanket around her before I have her sit in a highly-

cushioned, straight-backed chair. I now know that if she sits in her recliner, she'll lie back, and it only will make her breathing worse.

The back door to the outside is in her living room. Besides the inside door, there's a storm door with a glass window. By pressing two little clips on each side of that window, I can lift the glass and expose a screen beneath it. That's what I do each morning now, after I wrap that blanket around my mother, and put her in that chair. Then, I slide her chair closer to the door.

After I give her a glass of juice, I count out her pills, one at a time, in her palm. I say, "One pill, Mom, one pill, Mom, one pill, Mom..." until each pill is taken. Then I take the pulse oximeter and clasp it onto one of her fingers. Her blood oxygen saturation is always good. Sometimes, her pulse rate is high. But, every time, she says, "Oh, that cold, fresh air feels so good."

Hearing her say that and, seeing her all bundled up, I think of Charlene and her baby Jennifer.

A few days ago, I telephoned Charlene to tell her how I think of her each and every morning after I get my mother out of bed. Having once been my classroom aide for twenty years, she knows me well as I do her.

I have favorite stories about her like how she, after graduating from high school, worked in an office and loved the sound of her typewriter...the clack, clack, clacking...as she typed away. When she told me that story, I pictured a young, young Charlene, cute and very efficient.

Another time, she told me when her daughter Jennifer was a baby, how, after lunch, she would bundle up Jen in blankets, put her outside in her carriage, on the wide front porch, under the open living room window, even in the winter. Charlene could see Jen through the window as she, Charlene, went about her housework. She told me how Jen would sleep away the afternoon.

When she told me that story, I pictured Jen, all bundled up, cheeks rosy, a very healthy baby, breathing in that fresh air.

That's why I telephoned Charlene, that long-time friend, who knows me so well. I knew she would understand. I knew she would understand how I could see parallels between that baby Jennifer who was thriving and my elderly mother who is dying.

*Epilogue:* Our mother Erline died on January 11, 2022, at the age of ninety-one, in her own bed, with her two daughters and granddaughter Sara at her side.