

Aunt Helen Sees a Ghost

Category: Stories

written by Laurie Douglas | April 23, 2008

Five months ago my husband and I moved from Manhattan to Queens to take care of his 84-year-old aunt, who has Alzheimer's. Although she can't cook, shop, or manage her money anymore, Helen is remarkably functional in her own home. She's lived here almost forty years, more than half of them alone, as a widow.

Nothing has changed—the furniture, the bric-a-brac, even the refrigerator magnets—since my husband was a child. Neither has Helen's daily routine. She spends the day on autopilot, brewing cups of weak Lipton tea loaded with half-and-half, washing tiny machine-loads of hankies and hand towels, and making her way through the house at dusk, flicking on plug-in nightlights along the way. It's the perfect setup for someone with dementia; she can do a lot without having to think.

Ironically, Helen hates this house, curses it daily. It's a constant reminder of what she can no longer do, and she still feels responsible for maintaining it, even though we reassure her that we take care of it now.

A few days ago, she and I watched *That's Entertainment* (perfect, no plot). It was odd; every time a different movie star came on screen, she asked if the person were dead.

Helen:

That one's down in the ground now, right?

Laurie:

Yep, he died a long time ago.

Helen:

How far down is he?

Laurie:

I'm not sure. Maybe twenty years.

Helen:

Well... it sure would be nice if we could grab them and pull all of them back up and have them in this room with us. I feel so bad they're all gone. Some day I'll go down in the ground, too, and push my husband over. And that will be that. I wonder what it will be like...I wonder....

Laurie:

I like to think that when we die, we go out of our bodies and fly around for a while, that we can see everything and go everywhere. I think it will be nice.

Helen:

Did you ever see that?

Laurie:

What? Have I ever flown up in the air? I haven't, but some people can do it. My friend Teresa says she used to fly up out of her body into the corner of the room and then watch herself down below, sitting on the couch! Can you imagine?

Helen:

A couple of days—I mean, a couple of weeks ago—I saw something like that.

Laurie:

You went out of your body?!

Helen:

Well, no. I was sitting here, with that on (*gestures to the TV*), and I thought I saw something standing right over there. It scared me. I wasn't sure. Was I sleeping? Was it in my head? But I did see something.

Laurie:

You think you saw a ghost? Wow. Did you know who it was?

Helen:

No, it wasn't anyone I knew.

Laurie:

What did it look like?

Helen:

I can't remember. I am so stupid, it's this stupid head (*she taps her forehead with her middle finger*).

Laurie:

You're not stupid, we all forget things. Maybe it'll pop back into your head in a day or so.

Helen:

I'm not sure about that. But I saw something. It scared me. I didn't look over at it, and I tried really hard not to think of it.

Laurie:

If it happens again, or if you're ever scared about anything, come upstairs and knock on our door. Even in the middle of the night. I'll wake up. I'll go down and look. If it's a ghost, I really want to see it! (*We both laugh.*)

Helen:

I don't know what it was about. Maybe I imagined it.

Laurie:

You could have been dreaming and just thought you were awake. Or you could've

seen something that wasn't there, it's called hallucinating. It's nothing to worry about. Why were you scared? Did whatever it was seem mean or angry?

Helen:

Not really...(long pause) I thought maybe I was going to go in the ground.

Laurie:

Oh... Did you feel sick?

Helen:

No, I was just sitting here watching with the lights on.

Laurie:

Wow. TV and lights on and everything. Well, I don't know what you saw. But the good thing is that you're still her! *(We both laugh.)*

Helen:

Yes ma'am! I'm here, and everyone else is gone. Eighty-four years. Too much!

Laurie:

I tell you what: when you die, if you get to fly all around, will you come back and see me?

Helen:

No way! I'm getting OUTTA this friggin' house!

About the author:

Laurie Douglas is art director of *Pulse—voices from the heart of medicine*. Six months after this story was written, Helen moved to a studio apartment on the dementia-care floor of an assisted-living facility. She says she likes it there because she doesn't have to "work" anymore. Helen turned 87 in February 2009.

Story editor:

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