

# Children of the Fog

(Life and Love in a Nursing/Rehab Center)

By Fil Jacobs August 19, 2017

## Elegy

A dense fog had moved in during the night and was ignoring the sun's feeble attempt to burn it off. We traveled slowly to lessen the fog's dangers. Visibility was bad enough that only the ghostly-gray outlines of the trees could be seen at the sides of the narrow road. I began to worry that we had started our little jaunt too early on this foggy morning.

Barbara paid little attention to conditions outside her car window except to tap on her glass in wonder at the fog. So much was alien to her since the onset of her dementia and its consequent loss of memory that she took a child's delight in the things that now seemed ever new. She hugged her stuffed animal to her chest, almost tight enough to activate its voice box.

I glanced at her from time to time, trying to keep my mind on the road and off that sinking feeling that comes to me when I contemplate our sixty years of near-perfect marriage and the disturbing certainty that it must end prematurely in any preferred condition. Noticing my attention, she gave her head a slight toss the way women do to compose their hair and this caused her hair to float about her head in a lovely dark cloud that left me troubled.

Are women even vaguely aware that these unconscious little tics burn themselves into a man's soul—only to haunt his nights after they are gone from his life?

Suddenly, without warning, my thoughts were interrupted by the high-beams and fog-diffused headlamps of a vehicle coming head-on. Reflexively, I turned the car hard right as far as I dared, causing the oncoming vehicle to barely miss our left side. But I kept us out of the brush and unmired in the gullies at the edge of the road.

Our sudden swerve threw Barbara's weight against her stuffed animal, causing it to exclaim in a child's gleeful voice, "**That was a great hug! Now I'm ready for another one!**"

We had stopped for a frightened minute to calm our nerves, when the absurdity of the toy's voice caused us to laugh together, although such attempts might just have been her way of trying to stay with the mood. No matter, her efforts were the important thing—in her former life she was fearless and wouldn't suffer anything to defeat her. Some of that courage was still in her.

It is hard to imagine the kind of daily struggle Alzheimer's patients must go through.

"Do you remember that time soon after we were married, when we fell asleep on the beach and woke up after dark? All we could hear was the seething murmur of the ebb tide and a mournful fog-horn way out at sea. That was pretty scary, wasn't it?"

Yes," she answered and squeezed my hand firmly. It was clear that she had some memory of the event and I was grateful to know that our ties with the past had not been completely severed. Her loss of short-term memory created a few daily disconnects, but how dull our lives would have been without the long-term memories that enrich us and inform our struggles.

If a dear one's splintered person is the sum of the many parts that made her a whole person, then

the memory of our lives and experiences must be the most profound part of it.

It is saddening to learn how the dementias work insidiously to steal one's personhood while the rest lives on—*identity theft in extremis*

Sooner or later, without further scientific advances, I think any of us might become the child of one fog or another. I wondered what Barbara thought of her condition, but the possibility of guessing what's in another's mind is usually fraught with error, even without dementia. We are like unmoored islands that would drift apart but for the loving relationships that anchor us.

(This unmooring is a greater risk in nursing homes where so much autonomy is relinquished. Friends and family should be encouraged to visit or call often. As a long term resident here I know how my spirits are nourished by contact with my people from the outside—I am fortunate to have that support.)

Barbara was an extraordinary woman, strong of mind and spirit, and she had schooled herself after her retirement from business (and before her Alzheimer's affliction) to manage tennis tournaments and ultimately become the Executive Director of the U.S. Tennis Association's Mid-Atlantic Division. It was remarked by her tennis mates that she was as clever and quick as a fox and how difficult it was to get a tennis ball past her. If a marriage can survive playing tennis doubles with one's intense wife as his partner, nothing could bode better for the health of the union. I'm sure all wives are beautiful to their men and Barbara's dark, exotic beauty was a thing of joy to this man.

For a few minutes today, she and I became the happy, resourceful people we once were, as we laughed together at her stuffed animal's startling voice. She had occasional moments of sly mischief that caused most people to like her soon after knowing her. I was with her in those early days when her psychiatrist asked her how she thought her dementia was doing and she replied:

"I don't know—because I have Alopecia, no—wait, that's Fil's condition... at this point the doctor knew he was being put on, but he grinned and waited for the punch line.) She continued, "I meant to say, I have Alzheimer's and can't remember *diddly-squat*." (In those early days she could still invent neologisms with fitting accuracy). The doctor gave her an appreciative chuckle. She had her moments in the early days of her illness, dealing with it the way she had dealt with her life; with resolve and humor. About five years ago Barbara passed away. May she be exalted in her new home among the stars.

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Greetings to those of you who have precious ones in a Nursing/Rehab Center or one who is about to enter same. No worries, but please take it from me, because I am one of you—a long-term resident at East Bay Rehab in Clear Water, FL. Let your Special Ones know if you are free to visit them on certain days of the week so that they will have something fresh to look forward to. Regularity and dependability are the keys to success in this shared endeavor. Our directors, nursing staff, and CNAs are excellent at this facility, and at others, I would imagine—I believe oversight is usually provided by departments of local governments. Help your residents to organize smaller rooms than they have been accustomed to. Try to distract them from too much TV—a walk and activity outdoors is of greater benefit to their health.

Shakespeare said it best, circa 500 years before the invention of television and I must borrow it now: "Sound and Fury Signifying Nothing! A Tale Told by an Idiot!"

Don't forget how important human touch is—it will show your affection for your Special Ones: (Massage lotion onto dry skin as a treat—check with the nurses for help if questions of sensitivity arise).

Good Luck from your fellow resident and writer, Fil Jacobs.

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