

# *A Dozen Daffodils*

A True Story by Pat McKinster

On March 19, 1999 my partner of 34 years moved to an assisted living facility due to his Alzheimer's Disease and a broken hip. People ask me how I could send my husband away after all those years. I ask myself how I could do such a thing when I promised him repeatedly I would always take care of him in our home forever, no matter what. I came to know and understand the disease that took him away from me and that I was no match for the years of illness and devastation this disease caused our family.

My husband probably became ill in 1985. The first signs were so subtle—little things like him forgetting to say goodnight to me and throwing away IRS tax forms would only have been noticed by someone very close. As the years went on there was a shift of family responsibilities—all to me. Yet there was never one word from my husband that there even was an illness, no discussion as to how we would handle this devastating situation in our married life, no understanding from my husband of my extreme reaction to the loss of my partner and he never said goodbye to me. One day I woke up and realized I recognized the body but the person inside was a total stranger.

Over the years we had the usual problems: car accidents, lawsuits, loss of driving privileges, the frittering away of the family bank accounts, everything in the home and yard stolen, fantastic paranoid stories of daily happenings, and people trying to take advantage of my husband. There was nothing I could or would do until my husband became verbally abusive and was falling down daily at home.

Most nights when I arrived home from work during the last year he lived at home my husband would be on the floor and could not remember how to stand up. We finally devised a method for him to get back into his bed and thankfully he had a good result from his broken hip but his pain cues seemed to disappear, his gait changed, and he became incontinent. I also noticed he lost the ability to use the telephone. One night I practiced dialing 911 with him—not realizing that as soon as the last number was dialed someone would respond! Trying to explain this to the 4 police officers that responded to our call was useless.

Somehow my husband was lost, did not know where he was even though we had lived in our home 30 years, could not tell the difference between 12 noon and 12 midnight and many nights would bang on the table at midnight demanding food. He could no longer pull up his pants, turn on the water in the bathroom, was leaving a hammer in the refrigerator and a meatloaf in the cupboard and had stopped drinking coffee because he could not remember how to use the coffee pot. It was a 24-hour a day existence for me. Work all day, put the purse down, head for the laundry room or dishwasher and then get ready for the barrage of ugliness that was usually to follow.

One of the last significant things whereupon I made a decision to remove my husband from our home came from a visit by my brother who indicated I was 30



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loads of washing behind. Thirty loads! Not possible I said. Every night I washed as many loads as I could and washed every weekend but when I went out and opened the door to the washroom I was shocked at the length and height of the pile. Even as my brother and I washed all 30 loads there were 5 or 6 replacement loads daily and I finally realized as long as my husband was at home I would never get caught up. By now he was totally incontinent and urinating all over the house.

When I began to look for an assisted living facility I did not understand the differences in facilities. Although I explained my situation in detail to everyone I talked with, and finally coming to the understanding this was to cost me thousands of dollars a month, I also learned there was a charge for everything: a haircut, a trip to the doctor, depends, washing of his clothes, and every other need he had—there was a base price plus. The most shocking revelation came when the disease had progressed to a point where no one wanted him because he was too old, weighted too much and was too sick. It was now time for me to dig in my heels and find the right place for my husband to live with someone who could understand and care for him.

On that chilly Friday morning when my husband was moving away I walked outside in the early hours to say goodbye to the world I had known for over 30 years. I knew things would never be the same again and wondered how I could possibly live alone. Even though he had been sick for so many years there was a comfort in his presence and knowing I was his wife. I had never lived alone before, never spent an Easter or Christmas alone in this house.

The yard was dreary and brown that morning except for one pot, which held a dozen daffodils. I looked at those flowers and thought of them as solitary soldiers in such a thoughtless, cruel world, but standing so bright, straight and tall. I thought if they could live in their fragile bodies in the wind, sun, heat, hail and rain that I should surely be able to live when my husband was going to a better place where he would no longer be alone and someone would be there to help him when he was in need.

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