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I Remember the Lightning Too

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I REMEMBER THE LIGHTNING TOO

Larry and I have been driving almost four hours with only a few words passing between us. I don't feel like talking. Larry understands and is respecting my need for solitude. Looking out as the summer-green countryside flashes by, I sigh heavily, and then break the silence.

"Why did God do this to my father?" I ask, not really questioning Larry.

"He didn't. It's just a fact of life." Larry replies and resumes his silence.

Alzheimer's disease has my father in its grasp, and at the age of seventy he lives in a world where, most of the time, he seems terribly afraid. I wonder what he sees or feels that frightens him so. Then at other times, he has a totally vacant look. Somewhere in his mind exists a world that neither I nor anyone else can share. And only rarely now does he enter the reality of the world I know.

"Need to use the restroom? This is the last service station for a couple of hours," I hear Larry saying, but I don't bother to respond. I just sit listening to the almost dilent hum of the car engine.

"Sure you don't need to use the restroom?" Larry inquires once again before he pulls away from the service station.

I still don't feel like answering, and so I don't. What I really want to do is to turn the car around and pretend all is right with the world, but it isn't, at least not in my world. I don't want to think anymore, so I just sit staring at nothing in particular.

"We're almost there." I hear Larry say.

"The sound of Larry's voice has made me conscious of my surroundings, and just ahead I see the big white farmhouse where I grew up. In the past, coming home has been such a joyous occasion, but today it's about more than I can bear.

As Larry parks the car, I feel a knot getting tighter and tighter in the pit of my stomach. I open the car door, but my feet feel stuck to the floor. I really don't think I can move.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Larry questions.

"Why are you so insensitive?" I snap as I become unglued

from what had seemed moments earlier to be a permanent position. In one swift motion I am standing outside the car and without even a pause deliberately slam the door with a thud. I begin to walk toward the house when it suddenly occurs to me that I don't hear Fluffy's bark. I glance quickly toward her doghouse, and I know.

"Mom has gotten rid of Fluffy. How could she do that without telling me?" I grumble.

Larry doesn't respond. He just kind of nudges my elbow in the direction of the steps on the back side of the house. Just as I mount the first step, I hear the door open. I look up and there stands Mom with both arms outstretched.

"You look tired," she says as she hugs me extra tight. One hug from her and all the disappointment and anger I felt moments earlier are gone. Mom has been a faithful companion and caretaker to my father. Throughout his suffering she has done everything in her power to make life pleasant and bearable for him. I had known for months that she could no longer care for Fluffy, who, like my dad, had grown old and sick. I am sure, without even asking, that Mom found a good home for my dad's shaggy friend.

Standing there in the warmth of my mother's arms, I momentarily feel peace. Mom knows I'm scared, though. She always has been able to read my every thought. She strokes my hair and pleads, "Why don't you rest tonight? You can see Dad tomorrow."

"No, I can't. I've got to see him now. Where is he?" In spite of my fear, I feel an urgency to rush toward my father's bedside.

"He's in the first bedroom."

With great apprehension, I walk through the dining room and then the living room. Much too quickly I reach Dad's bedroom. I notice the door is about halfway open, and I am relieved for I remember the awful screech it has made for years. It makes one of those irritating sounds like when you stretch the rubber ring around the opening in an inflated balloon and slowly let the air out.

With my heart pounding, I turn sideways and slide through the partially opened door. And there on the far side of the room is Dad.

I almost tiptoe toward his bed. I don't want to startle him. He turns his head in my direction. He knows somebody is in the room. The closer I get the more frightened he becomes. His breathing is heavy, and his eyes are watching my every move. I finally get close enough to lean over and gently kiss him on the forehead. He doesn't move, and I get the impression that he feels nothing at that moment except fear. Dad never was comfortable with strangers, and right now that's just what I am – a stranger to my own father. It grieves me to see how thin he's become. As I seat myself beside his bed, I notice his hair is neatly combed: his gray and blue-checked pajamas are clean and freshly pressed.

Trying to hold back the tears, I swallow hard and then force myself to speak. "Do you know who I am?" comes out of my mouth, but "Daddy, please come back," is screaming inside of me.

He doesn't respond, and so I just sit quietly by his bed wanting somehow to make contact with the father who once lived inside the frail body before my eyes.

"Daddy, I've come home, come home to spend some time with you," I manage with a little more control over my emotions now.

But he still doesn't answer, and I notice that he seems both scared and confused. His brow is wrinkled, his eyes wide open, and his shoulders are pressing hard against the bed as if he is trying to retreat.

"Please, don't be afraid," I plead.

"Daddy, I'm scared too. You know I never have been very brave. Do you remember, when I was a little girl, how scared I was of lightning?"

His gaze now is faraway and uncomprehending.

I gently wipe the perspiration from his forehead and continue. "Well, I remember. I remember how you used to take me up on your lap in that big old rocker on the front porch, and while I buried my head in your chest, you'd hold me real close. At first you'd just rock, but then you'd begin to describe the beauty in every flash of light you saw dart across the sky. You made it seem like magic. Finally, when I couldn't stand it any longer, I'd slowly unbury my head. Then the two of us would

sit quietly and just watch as the lightning played hide and seek, you called it."

I reach through the rails running up the side of Dad's bed and place one of his paralyzed hands between both of mine. I want so desperately to hold him and to make his world peaceful once again.

I hear familiar footsteps approaching from behind and then feel the warmth of Larry's hand upon my shoulder. He leans over, pats Dad on the hand, and says, "It's good to see you, Anderson."

Dad moves a little, but he doesn't speak.

Without really looking at me, Larry says, "Your mother has fixed some cake and coffee. You want to eat some?"

"No. I'm not hungry. You go ahead. I'll join you in a little while."

"I don't want to leave Dad's side. I feel I must stay and somehow force him back into my world. Hopelessness eventually takes over, though, so I kiss his familiar forehead and whisper, "I love you, Daddy. Goodnight."

Turning my back, I start toward the door, but then I feel compelled to look over my shoulder. Dad has his neck craned forward as if listening to something special. I notice his eyes are bright and lucid.

"I remember the lightning too," he says.

I wait, expecting more. But there is only silence.

Phyllis Dales Davis