

AND SO IT GOES

I visited my Dad last week. He still lives independently in the home he and the woman he loved for over 60 years, my “lovely Mom,” shared in suburban Milwaukee for the last ten years of her life. He’s almost 92 now, and his memory issues – defined by the medical community as “mild cognitive impairment” can make life interesting ala the Chinese curse: “May you live in interesting times.”

Dad’s daily companion is a scruffy little shih tzu he named Chiffy after a high-pitched stop on the pipe organ he loves to play, called the *chiff*. One of the primary joys in his life is classical music – either playing it on the organ, which does at least once a month at his church, or hearing it blasted at ear-damaging volume from the speakers in his living room or his cherry-red Miata convertible coupe. His other joy is gardening. He plants between 500 and 800 annuals each spring. By July his property is a blaze of oranges, reds, pinks. Fall cleanup lasts well into December.

His five children have vowed to do all we can to enable him to “age in place,” current jargon for staying out of the nursing home. Dad is physically strong: he takes no medications, jogs a slow mile most days through the streets of his neighborhood with Chiffy, and plays doubles tennis weekly. He also keeps up a croquet and ping pong tournament with my brother, and wins as often as not.

However, the memory issues are taking their toll. His appearance is becoming more disheveled, especially to those of us who don’t see him so frequently. Is this just the look of an elderly bachelor, we wonder, or signs that the previously mentioned memory impairment is sliding towards Alzheimer’s? He is certainly more interested in the exterior of the house than the interior, and the interior can get pretty gross. Dad keeps track of his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren with a complicated system of notes, stickies, more notes, and calendar jottings which – when added to the accumulated junk mail – threaten to overwhelm his kitchen counter and dinette table. Still, each great-grandchild received a birthday card on or about the correct date. Not bad! On the other hand, it took my sister three weeks to convince the cable company not to disconnect service over a payment he missed when he couldn’t locate his check register. Not good!

Dad pretty steadfastly refuses assistance, but we make small incursions – a load of laundry here, an electronic bill-pay there. As the sibling who lives furthest away, my role is generally advisory and supportive. When I travel to Wisconsin, other for the annual group cleaning “party,” I mostly just visit with Dad, swap stories, and provide a Scrabble “dupe,” – someone willing to play by his rules and lose nine out of ten times. Last week, however, I got to exercise my caregiver chops.

Dad was the organist on Palm Sunday. He went ahead for the first service, and I drove over to meet him for the second service. A fire truck idled in the driveway, an ambulance at the back door, bay doors ajar. “I sure hope that’s not for Dad,” I swear was my first thought. After quickly parking the old Ford Taurus (No, I’m not permitted to drive the Miata!), I headed to the church. A knot of parishioners I passed on the way were discussing the fact that they had found a substitute organist for the second service. “Oh, shit!” Not very appropriate, but my exact words – expressed *sotto voce* as I entered the church, I’m

afraid. The EMTs were waiting for me. Apparently, Dad had fainted and they were monitoring an irregular heartbeat.

I rallied all the semi-local sibs by cell phone as I followed the ambulance to the hospital. After the requisite interminable wait in a room full of medical magazines, I was allowed to join Dad in a stark ER room. He was alone on a gurney and hooked up to various monitors, but had no real idea of who he had seen or what they were monitoring. My brother arrived, and after some time a young, brown-eyed technician came in to do the intake paperwork. Dad was aware that he had fainted at the church, and he quickly demonstrated that his sense of humor remained intact.

“Do you use oxygen at home?” the tech inquired, somewhat belatedly, I thought, since none was in evidence; and Dad had been there for over an hour.

“Yes,” Dad responded. “Several times a day!”

“DAAAAD!” my brother and I both protested. “You do not!”

“Yes,” he assured us. “Every day, I go outside and breathe deeply!” Thus, setting the tone for the rest of his interview.

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