

It had been a good day for Tommy O'Brien. His mom, Joanie, had been calm and she appeared to have enjoyed the walk that she and Tommy had taken in the local state park. Since Tommy had been a little boy, he had enjoyed going to the state park. The park was "natural" having been set aside from the developers. Being that it was "natural" it offered a window into what the area must have been like hundreds of years ago. A time before any settler from the western shores of Europe had traveled here to make a new life.

When Tommy was younger, Joanie used to take him to the park to walk along the trails that meandered in and out of the Palisades Mountains that lined the mighty Hudson River. Tommy always marveled at his mom. She had a quiet appreciation of the great outdoors. Joanie also very spiritual and she respected the thing she called the "spirits of the land". Tommy remembered questioning her about what exactly she meant by that phrase. Her response to him was nebulous. She said it was more about feeling and less about definition. She told him that he would understand more when he grew older.

As Tommy sat on the front porch of this his family's house, he felt as if he finally understood what Joanie meant when she explained the "spirits of the land" to him so many years before. He could not describe it but he could feel it. As he sipped a cold pint of Budweiser, he let the good feelings of the day rush over him like a warm blanket. Joanie sat directly across from him on the porch in her favorite chair. As Tommy stared at his mom he realized that she had been sitting in the chair for over five minutes. That was welcomed relief because Joanie was prone to shuffle endlessly back and forth anywhere she went. When she shuffled, Tommy would have to follow her to make sure she did not fall. She often fell because she had difficulty seeing a set of stairs or a curb that was in her path. But today she just sat with the cup of Lipton tea that Tommy had made for her parked neatly to her right on a small redwood table. Tommy then remembered that he needed to help her drink it. He stuck his index finger fairly deep into the mug and realized that the tea had cooled sufficiently enough to offer it to Joanie. He had made the

mistake of offering hot tea to Joanie in the past. He had forgotten that Joanie had long ago forgotten how to blow on hot liquids and as a result when Tommy offered her tea, she usually ended up burning her tongue. But not today, today Tommy had let the tea cool sufficiently. He lifted the mug to Joanie's mouth. She opened wide and Tommy carefully spilled some of the brownish white liquid in.

Much to Tommy's surprise, Joanie swallowed the liquid without spilling. He did not know if Joanie was acting on reflex but as soon as she had swallowed the first mouth full, she opened her mouth wide again and waited anxiously for more. Tommy smiled as he knew that somewhere deep down in her person, there was a piece of Joanie that was enjoying the day as much as he was. He spilled more of the liquid into Joanie's mouth and she swallowed again. The pair repeated the process until the mug was drained. Tommy then went into the house to place the mug in the dishwasher and to check on dinner.

For dinner, Tommy had purchased two fresh slabs of Striped Bass at the local market. He was not a huge fan of Striped Bass but he knew that Striped Bass was his mother's favorite. Tommy remembered the old days when Joanie used to scour the local markets to find the freshest fish at the cheapest price. Tommy checked a few places but had not been as diligent as Joanie. Fortunately, even though it was October when the bass was not as plentiful as in the spring, Tommy was able to procure some really fresh fillets from the market just down the hill in the center of town.

Tommy placed the two fillets he had purchased on a counter near a window in the kitchen so that he could maintain a good view of mom. Tommy washed both fillets and then rolled them in some olive oil. He next rolled the fish in frying flour to which he added some Cajun spice. He placed the fillets on a cooking pan and let them sit. He next shucked three ears of corn and smeared them all with butter and salt. He then wrapped each ear of corn in tin foil and placed them next to the fillets. He was about to go to another counter to grab some tomatoes and cucumbers that he had purchased at the local farm

market when he realized that he needed to check on mom. He looked out on the porch and his mom was still seated in the same chair she had been seated in before. But something was different.

Tommy squinted to make sure that what he was seeing was real and he was pleasantly surprised that it was real. Joanie was smiling. Tommy could not remember the last time he had seen his mother smile but it made him happy and he suddenly grew emotional. He always thought that it was one of his greatest weaknesses which was he had trouble controlling his emotions but he realized a long time ago that there was not much he could do about it. It was just one of those things that made Tommy, Tommy.

Tommy caught himself in time to remember he still needed to prepare the tomatoes and cucumbers. He made his way back to the kitchen and washed two of each under the water in the sink. He sliced them up and placed them on a long flat serving platter. He next drizzled both in balsamic vinaigrette before placing the platter back into the refrigerator to cool. He next placed the fish and corn on another serving platter and went back outside to start the grill.

It was six PM and already it was dusk. The long days of summer had grown shorter as the calendar advanced to the beginning of October. Tommy missed the light of summer but he loved the cool of autumn. Besides the coolness of the season, Tommy especially loved the turning of the leaves. He again looked out the window at mom and noticed that the two majestic oaks that guarded the front yard had started to turn a brilliant yellow and brown. Across the street two maples were starting to turn a brilliant red. Tommy loved when the leaves turned. He could think of no better art than to watch nature change its color.

He started the gas grill with a long wooden match and placed the platter that held the fish and corn on a side shelf attached to the grill. He closed the cover to let the grill heat. As bad as he wanted to sit and enjoy the evening, he knew it was time to take Joanie to the bathroom. As the Alzheimer's progressed over the past three years, Joanie had lost her ability to go to the bathroom by herself. Part of Joanie's

new bathroom routine was to sit in diapers for most of the day. Tommy realized he did not place Joanie in diaper today because the fabric of the diaper irritated her skin when she walked for a long period of time. He was fully expecting to find out that Joanie had wet herself but was pleasantly surprised to see that she when she stood up to be led to the bathroom she was dry.

He and Joanie had a routine in the bathroom. He would undo her garments after which Joanie would do her business. When Joanie was finished, Tommy would help his mom clean herself. Tommy had been squeamish about the arrangement at first but as the disease continued to bankrupt more and more of Joanie's being, he grew comfortable with helping his mom. She needed him just like he needed her during the dark years. But today's trip to the bathroom was different. Joanie allowed him to lead her to the bathroom but once there she went ahead of him and closed the door after her.

Tommy did not know what to do. He did not want to insult Joanie but he was unsure if she was still alert enough to be insulted. He decided to wait before barging in on his mom. He waited and waited and then after about five minutes he heard the toilet paper roll rotating and then a flush. He waited for another minute and then the door flew open and Joanie stood there. She still wore the blank stare of Alzheimer's but there was sense of something which Tommy could not put his finger on. Tommy inspected Joanie but did not see any stains and he realized that she had gone to the bathroom by herself without suffering an accident. He next led her back outside to her chair. She sat down willingly and Tommy returned to fire and cooked the night's supper.

He and Joanie feasted on the spoils of a Hudson Valley Harvest. The striped bass was very fresh and tasted delightful in the light oil and seasoning. But as good as the fish tasted, the corn stole the show. It was a marbled variety of alternating golden and white kernels or a variety that the locals liked to call "Peaches and Cream". The "Peaches and Cream" corn cobs were magnificent. Tommy ate two ears and helped his mom eat one. He held the ear up for Joanie who worked along the husk as Tommy rotated it

slowly in a clockwise fashion. Next the pair chomped on the tomatoes and cucumbers which were refreshing and cool.

After the pair had had their fill, Tommy cleared the plates from the table. In the kitchen he scooped out two big scoops of ice cream for the each of them in a small bowl. He decided to let his melt a little while helped Joanie with hers. Much to his surprise, Joanie grabbed the spoon out of his hand and began to eat the dessert by herself. He watched to make sure that she did not eat too much too fast which would give her an ice cream headache. Joanie paced quickly through the ice cream but not quickly enough to cause problems. Satisfied that Joanie was alright, Tommy made quick work of his dessert.

After dessert, Tommy cleared the bowls. He led Joanie back out to the porch and she again willing sat back down in her chair. It was a clear, crisp fall night. It was the kind of night that cooled quickly unlike the summer nights that took their time producing comfortable temperatures. Tommy decided that he too would sit on the porch. He wanted to watch football and he knew that Alabama was playing LSU at 8Pm. It was 730PM now. He decided to drag the TV that was in the living room out onto the porch. He had watched TV on the porch before but it was during the day and it was easy to check all the connections in the light of day. It was dark now and Tommy still needed light to make sure that all the wires remained snug when he pulled on the TV. He knew he was going to need a flashlight to do the work now.

He remembered that mom kept the flashlights in a hallway closet close to the kitchen. He went to the closet and looked for a flashlight. The closet was more unruly than he remembered and he began organizing some of the clutter as he searched. He found a flashlight but not before he saw it.

It was the little brown satchel that Joanie carried with her when she came to visit him in prison. She came every week for ten solid years. Tommy remembered Joanie and that satchel. Joanie would carry books, cookies, and when it was appropriate birthday presents in the satchel. Tommy lifted the satchel

and noticed that its soft leather had dried over the years. He was now forty six years old and close to turning forty seven. He had been in jail for ten years starting at age twenty. If someone had asked Tommy if he would have turned forty seven when he was twenty five, he would have said no. Prison did that to him, it robbed him of hope in the future.

It was Joanie's determination that kept the light of a bright future flickering in Tommy's life. Everyone except Joanie had given up on Tommy. Joanie believed in her son and she put her money where her mouth was by making sure to be there for him when just about everyone else in his life had given up on him. Joanie and that little brown satchel were like the Pony express arriving on the prairie. He took the satchel out of the closet and ran upstairs to his room when he plopped it on the bed. He promised himself that he would get the satchel oiled.

He came back down stairs and carried the TV to the porch. He then popped on the flashlight to make sure none of the cable connections had been broken. It looked like everything was fine and then he turned the TV on. The Crimson Tide and LSU tigers were lined up singing the national anthem. A thought popped into Tommy's head. He wanted to get Joanie ready for bed. She had walked a long distance today, longer than she done in the last few months and he was sure the combination of exercise and fresh air would bring sleep to Joanie. Then he looked at his mom and he noticed that she was smiling again. It made him so happy to see her smile. It had been a while since he saw that smile. It had always been a beacon of hope for him and it had lit up his life. He decided to just let her be.

Tommy went back into the house and grabbed another pint of Budweiser. He sat back down in the chair opposite to Joanie and began to watch the game. It was defensive battle for the first quarter and no one scored. Tommy having finished his second can of beer decided it was a good a time as any to use the bathroom. He looked over at his mom to see if she needed anything and suddenly realized that she had fallen off during the first quarter. He debated letting her just sit there asleep but decided it would not be

a smart thing to do. She had settled awkwardly in the chair and he knew that she would have a stiff neck in the morning if he left her stay in that position.

He went into the house and relived himself and then he came back outside to fetch Joanie. His mom had become a light sleeper lately but it took a good shake from Tommy to wake her. He led her back into her room where he helped her get into her night gown. He next led her into the bathroom and this time Joanie let Tommy help her go to the bathroom and brush her teeth. He next led Joanie to the bed and tucked her in for the night kissing her lightly on her forehead. He whispered "Goodnight Mom" in her ear. And then another odd thing happened. Joanie whispered "Good night Tommy". It had been months since she had spoken but Tommy was sure she had just said goodnight. He looked at his mom hoping that she would talk some more. He really missed her. But she had already fallen asleep.

As he left her room, he went to lock her door. The night walks had started like people had told him they would. When the aide was not there it was Tommy who had to deal with Joanie's night walks. Tommy found them scary. Tommy also did not get very much sleep when Joanie walked so he had spoken to the doctor who suggested that Tommy put an adult diaper on Joanie and lock her door at night. Tommy could not bring himself to do it right way but as he grew more fatigued from not sleeping, he decided he had to in order to survive. He looked down at the lock and made the decision that he was not going to lock the door tonight. He was right out on the porch and he would hear his mom if she began to wander.

Tommy grabbed another beer from the refrigerator and returned to the porch. He sat down in his chair enjoying the football and cool air of the autumn night. Alabama had kicked a field goal while Tommy was gone caring for Joanie and it was three nothing and LSU had the ball. That was the last bit of the game that Tommy remembered. He had underestimated how tired he was as well and soon fell fast asleep. When he woke up, SportsCenter was blasting on the TV. He quickly went over and turned it off. He next noticed that it was so late that it was now early. A dim ray of light was visible in the East. The

Robins had long stopped singing in the summer but Tommy heard Cardinals and Blue Jays in the distance. It was early morning. Tommy figured it to be around 545AM and when he walked into the house to check on his mother he was happy with himself for guessing so well on the time. It was actually 550AM.

Tommy first went to the bathroom and then went to his mom's door. He remembered now that he had left the door unlocked and he suddenly became frightened. What if she had wandered? He had been out cold and was sure he would have missed her. The only thing that reassured him was that the door to his mother's room looked undisturbed. He was pretty sure if Joanie had passed through the door, it would be ajar. She had been unable to close a door behind her for some time. He turned the knob on the door and when inside.

His mom was in bed under the covers. He went over to kiss her on the forehead. As he placed his lips on her forehead to kiss her, he noticed that she was cold. It was not very cold in the room and so he next lifted her blanket to feel down around her hip. He went to move her and realized that Joanie was stiff. She had passed in the night. He backed away from his mom for a moment and looked at her. The dawn outside grew in intensity and as it did light began to trickle into Joanie's room. In the light, Tommy saw that she was still smiling and if he did not know she had passed he would have sworn she looked as comfortable as he had seen her in months.

He grabbed her hand and squeezed only able to say "I love you Mom, I always will". Then while holding her hand he recited an Our Father and a Hail Mary. He next pulled up a chair that sat at the foot of her bed and just stared at Joanie. Through the crust of age he could see that bold, beautiful face. He remembered Joanie's positive personality. That personality had been his strength for so many years. He thanked God for making her his mother. He was always proud of her because she stood up for what she believed in and she always thought independently never feeling compelled to follow the crowd. But



most of all, Tommy remembered how much Joanie loved her family. She had proved her love again and again in life by going the extra mile for everyone.

Tommy suddenly found that he was happy for Joanie. All the indignities she had suffered at the hands of the horrible Alzheimer's had ended in a peaceful dignified way. Thankfully she had not known the worst of things that happened over the last six months having died her first death over two years ago at the hand of the disease. None of that mattered now. She was at peace. She was Joanie again not Joanie with Alzheimer's.

After sitting at the foot of Joanie's bed for a half an hour, Tommy rose from his chair and went to the kitchen and made coffee. He poured a steaming mug and left it black. He went to the front porch to watch the sunrise over the neighborhood. A scout crow cawed in the distance as the sun shined down on the changing leaves creating a spectacular fall scene. Tommy placed his mug down on the porch and made a mental list of the people he needed to call. He would first call his sister and then the undertaker before calling a long list of neighbors and friends. He wanted to make sure to get it right because it was mom.

Sufficiently satisfied that he had the complete list, Tommy let the bow wave of grief pour over him. As it did, he sobbed. He had always known that the second death was coming to Joanie. Joanie's mind had been taken in the first death but he knew that her body would be taken in the second. But none of that mattered now. The one person in this world that had loved him unconditionally was now gone. He could not think of another person who had done so much for him. He suddenly felt frightened that he was all alone in the world. But before he could spiral down out of control, the spirits of the land came to him and quietly reassured him that he would live to see another day. He also realized that his mom would want him to carry on and be happy.

Tommy took some consolation but was still very sad. It was approaching 7AM. It was too early to call his sister on the West Coast but he did manage to call the undertaker who told him that he would get dressed and be over shortly. He also told Tommy to call the police and explain that his mom had passed in her sleep. The undertaker told Tommy that the police would send a car around to the house. The undertaker needed the police there so they could release Joanie's body to him.

The two calls were exhausting and afterwards Tommy returned to Joanie's room where his mom laid smiling. He imagined that she would be smiling forever now and then made him really happy. But what made Tommy the happiest was that mom had died in her own bed, under her own covers - mom had died her second death with dignity.