

Cries in the Night

Donna turned on the television. As the set slowly came into focus, the weatherman hysterically gave his report in the attire of an Eskimo.

“It will be warmer at the North Pole today than it will be in Philadelphia with a wind chill factor of -17 degrees. Get out the snowmobiles and skis because it will be impossible for any cars to drive in the tons of snow that we'll be getting, at least a foot. Stock up your basement with as much food as possible because you don't want to be forced to revert to cannibalism and eat a family member all because *you* weren't prepared!”

Donna did not need to hear anymore of the weather report; she immediately picked up the telephone receiver. Donna knew her mother, Betty, would be afraid to be alone in this kind of weather, considering she had asthma. She decided to invite her mother over before the snow fell, so her husband, Arnold, would not have to pick up his mother-in-law in such harsh conditions. The telephone rang twice before her mother answered.

“Hello,” answered the elderly woman.

“Hi, mom. It's me. Donna,” said the young woman as she twirled the phone cord around her finger. Donna had a habit of playing with anything she could get her hands on when she was upset.

“Hi, Dee Dee. How ya holding up?” Betty sat down at her kitchen table. She was expecting her daughter to call. Donna called her every day, but especially when

disastrous weather was on the horizon; she made it a point to ensure her mother would be fine. Betty truly loved the relationship she had with her daughter.

“Mom, I’m 40 years old. Why do you still call me Dee Dee?” inquired the young woman.

“Because that’s your name.”

Donna decided not to argue. She would never win, so she changed the topic to the weather, her original intention. “Mom, I was thinking. The weatherman keeps calling for heavy snow tonight. Do you want me to send Arnold up to getcha?” asked Donna. She wanted to avoid a panic in the morning that would end in sending her husband out in blizzard-like conditions. “It really wouldn’t be a problem.”

“No, dear. You don’t have to worry ‘bout me. I’ve got plenty of soup, and I’m okay on medicine. I’ll be fine.” Betty loved her daughter, but she did not want to be a burden. Donna had children of her own that she had to worry about. Betty did not want her daughter to add her to her long list of worries.

“I’m just worried that it will snow so hard that we won’t be able to get to you,” Donna pressed. She imagined a previous snowfall when they waited until it was too late. An ambulance had to pick her mother up that time.

“Dee Dee, you worry too much. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.” Betty, slightly nervous about the weather, did her best not to let her daughter know.

“I know, mom, but you know how cold bothers your breathing.”

“I already told you that I have plenty of medicine. That includes the stuff for my breathing treatments. Hon, I’ll be okay. It almost sounds like *you* need a breathing treatment,” laughed Betty.

“Very funny, mom.” Donna knew her mother attempted to make her feel better, but she had a hunch that her mother concealed the fact that she nervously awaited the storm. She had heard all the excuses when her father died.

“I’m serious. I’ll be fine. Plus I don’t want to be any trouble.” Betty got up to make herself a cup of coffee, which always helped her to breath easier. As she balanced the phone on her shoulder, Betty reached for the small tin pot that she always boiled her water in. She filled the pot with water and placed it on the stove.

“You know it wouldn’t be a problem. We love it when you come over. I only want what’s best for you,” replied Donna. By now, Donna was thoroughly frustrated, and her finger was turning purple from the telephone cord wrapped around it. She unwound her finger and continued to play with the cord.

“I think it’s best for me to stay where I am.” Betty did not want to lose any of her independence. If she constantly stayed at her daughter's house, Betty felt like she would not have a home of her own anymore. The next step would be moving into one of her children's homes. She reached for the jar of Folgers instant coffee on the second shelf of the cabinet.

“Mom, as long as you’re sure—” started Donna.

“I’m positive,” answered Betty, her voice becoming louder with anxiety. She slammed the jar of coffee on the table.

“Okay, mom. Stay safe. Don’t wait ‘til the last minute to call an ambulance if your breathing gets bad. I know you hate going to the hospital, just in case--” Donna realized she had struck a nerve, but she had to make sure her mother was safe.

“Dee Dee, I won’t need to go to the hospital,” answered Betty, trying to keep her voice even. Betty hated going to the hospital. That was the last place on Earth that she wanted to be.

“I said just in case...,” said Donna, knowing she had annoyed her mother.

“I know. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Dee Dee. Take care.” Betty knew her daughter was right, and she began to calm down, as she sipped her coffee.

“You, too, mom. Bye.

“Bye bye, Dee Dee.”

As Donna hung up the telephone, her ten-year old son Ben entered the kitchen with his boots on, dragging a red plastic sled behind him.

“Mom, I found my boots in the closet down the basement. They were right next to the sled!” the blond-haired, freckle-faced exclaimed.

“Wonderful, Ben, but there’s one problem. It’s not snowing yet. Did you make a mess while you were looking for your boots?” Donna asked as she washed the lunch dishes. She did not want any more work than she already had.

“Well, kinda. The basement’s not that bad,” said the child as he looked at his feet.

“Go get Anne and tell her that she has to help you straighten up the mess you made and straighten up the living room, too. Nan will probably be coming over because of the snow. We need enough room for her downstairs so she can sleep,” said Donna as she put away her last dish.

“Anne, mom wants you to help me clean up the house! Nan’s coming over ‘cause of the snow!” shouted the little boy as he ran out of the kitchen and up the stairs to his

sister's room. Ben's boots thumped on the steps as he ran. Donna could hear her 14-year-old daughter's bedroom door open and her ever-so emphatic reply of "Oh, alright."

Donna shook her head and began to prepare dinner as she normally did on a Friday afternoon. Dinner was always a chore in itself. Everybody liked something different, so she found herself cooking several different things most nights. Donna had too much on her mind tonight to cater to her children's likes and dislikes, so she threw some baked potatoes in the oven. Everyone liked them.

Just as Donna began to serve dinner, her husband Arnold walked in the door from work. He had snowflakes in his hair.

"I guess the weatherman wasn't kiddin'. It's really coming down out there. The flakes are really tiny, and, you know, when the snowflakes are smaller, the storm is gonna last a while," said the broad-shouldered man as he entered the kitchen to kiss his wife. "So how is everything, honey?"

"Oh, Arnold, not so good. I talked to mom this afternoon to see if she wanted to come over because of the snow. Of course, she said 'no.' She is so stubborn like that. I figured it would be easier if she came over now before the storm hits. I just have a feeling that with her breathing and all it would be better for everyone," sighed Donna shaking her head.

"Donna, you know how your mother is. She'll be fine," Arnold said as he put his arms around his wife's waist. "Can I help you put the food out?"

"Sure. Here you go." Donna handed her husband a platter of chicken and the bowl of mixed vegetables.

The family sat down together and began to eat. Halfway through the meal, the telephone rang. Anne jumped up and reached for the receiver, hoping it would be for her.

“Hello,” answered the young girl. “Oh, hi, Nan, how are you? Oh, I see. Hold on. Let me get mom for you.” Anne, wearing a worried look on her face, immediately handed the receiver to her mother. Donna took the receiver from her daughter, hoping everything was ok.

“Hi, mom. What’s wrong?” Donna asked anxiously.

“Dee Dee, could...you...come...get me?” the older woman asked her daughter, struggling to talk because she was having difficulty breathing. “Hold on, I have to use my spray.” There was a silence at the other end of the phone and then heavy breathing. “I know I said I didn’t want to be a problem, but I’m having trouble breathing. I’m afraid to stay here by myself like this with the snow and all. I don’t....want....to...go....to the...hospital,” wheezed Betty.

“Okay, mom. You don’t have to go to the hospital. Me and Arnold will come up to getcha. Do the best you can to get stuff together. If you can’t, don’t worry. When we get up there, I’ll help you get everything together. We should be there in a half an hour. You’ll be fine, mom,” Donna reassured her mother the best she could.

“Thanks, Dee Dee. I love you,” replied the older woman with sincerity and relief. She sat on her sofa surrounded with pill bottles, inhalers, an oxygen tank, and a nebulizer unit. “See ya soon. Bye.”

“Bye, mom.” Donna hung up the telephone and began to run around trying to get ready. “Anne, could you do the dishes? Ben, help your sister. Me and dad have to pick up Nan. She’s having a hard time breathing, so she’s gonna spend the night.”

Arnold and Donna put on their jackets and boots, and the two rushed out into the snow, which had already started to lay on cars and lawns. Arnold cleared the snow off the windshield, and they got into the car. The streets, still not treacherous, had begun to become covered with a light dusting of powdery snow. After 20 minutes, Donna and Arnold arrived at Betty's house. Once at the house, Donna got out her key to unlock her mother's door.

"Mom, we're here," Donna said as she knocked on the door. Donna and Arnold entered the house. Betty had a suitcase and other items by the door. She sat in a chair at the dining room table engaged in a breathing treatment. When she saw the two come up the steps, Betty turned off the nebulizer unit to welcome them.

"Hi," said the older woman. She hugged and kissed her daughter and her son-in-law. "I have everything ready. All that has to be packed away is my breathing machine. Don't forget to take off the tubing when you put it away."

Donna removed the tube from the machine and placed it into the box. She unplugged the unit and wound the cord around it. Donna and Arnold proceeded to pack the car with a suitcase, an oxygen tank, the nebulizer unit, and a bag containing pills. Donna then took her mother by the arm and helped her navigate the snow-covered walkway and on into the car. Betty covered her mouth with a scarf because the cold bothered her breathing. She used her inhaler once in the car, which helped immensely.

On the car ride home, Betty remained silent. She felt immense guilt for troubling her daughter. Relieved her mother was safe; Donna gazed out the car window at the snow. The local radio station kept Arnold updated on road conditions. The ride endured thirty minutes, with very little conversation.

The car pulled in front of Donna and Arnold's house. Arnold honked the horn, and Anne and Ben, without coats, came running from the house to help their father with their grandmother's luggage. Donna began to help her mother out of the car.

"Guys, are you crazy? It's freezin' out here. Where are your coats?" Arnold asked, slightly annoyed. He handed the children the suitcase and bag of pills that he retrieved from the trunk.

"Well, I didn't have to go that far, and I'm not gonna be out here that long," whined Anne as she took the suitcase.

"Don't talk back. You could get sick. Get in the house," Arnold said. By now all of the luggage was in the house, and Donna continued to assist Betty up the front steps. Anne held the door as her mother and grandmother went inside.

Donna set up the nebulizer unit to treat her mother who was struggling to breathe again. Betty sat in the rocking chair with the kazoo-like mouthpiece between her teeth. The mouthpiece, filled with medicine, was attached to the machine with clear, plastic tubing. The machine would make a loud humming noise, and smoke poured from the back of the mouthpiece. In a way, it acted like a constant inhaler.

When Betty finished the treatment, her grandchildren gave her a big hug and a kiss. They loved when she visited because the three of them always had fun. Betty always carried several kazoos for the children. They would play the kazoo, and she would sing. After an elaborate kazoo concert, Donna began to send the children to bed.

"Okay, guys, it's gettin' late. It's time for bed. Don't forget to scrub your teeth." The children, disappointed, dragged their feet as they went upstairs. "Mom, are you

okay? Do you need anything? What lights do you want me to leave on?" Donna asked her mother.

"I'm fine, Dee Dee. Could you get me a glass of water and my transistor radio? You can leave the light on over the kitchen sink. I should be okay," replied Betty with a smile.

"Are you sure, mom?" Donna asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. Thank you, Dee Dee. I love you," Betty replied with a smile as she gave her daughter a hug and a kiss goodnight.

"Goodnight, mom. I love you, too." Donna climbed the stairs to bed with relief. Her mother slept safely in a house full of people instead of alone during the snowstorm. Donna fell asleep easily that night.

Near midnight, a noise disturbed Donna's slumber. It was a human voice.

"Help me! Help me!" moaned a strained male voice. Donna got out of bed and looked out of her bedroom window in search of someone outside. She saw no one. The snow continued to fall, and not a soul could be seen on the street. Donna dismissed the noise as a dream and returned to bed. No sooner had she closed her eyes, then she heard the same voice, and the radiator pipes began to bang. This time Donna awakened Arnold.

"Arnold, do you hear some one calling for help?" she asked her half-asleep husband.

"No, I don't," he replied as he rolled over in bed.

"Well, do you at least hear the radiator pipes banging?" Donna asked with frustration.

“Yeah. Go back to sleep, Donna. Everything’s fine,” said Arnold in an attempt to get more sleep.

“I’m gonna go check on mom.” Donna got out of bed and called to her mother, leaning over the railing.

“Mom, are you okay?” she whispered from the landing, trying not to wake the children.

“No!”

Donna immediately ran downstairs to investigate the problem.

“The tubing...came off... the breathing...machine, and I...can’t find my spray,” wheezed the old woman, struggling to speak.

Donna fitted the tubing back on the machine for her mother, and Betty started a treatment. She then searched for her mother’s inhaler, putting her hands down and under the sides of the sofa. After a few frantic moments, she found it. It had fallen down the side of the sofa. After Betty had finished her breathing treatment, she returned to bed.

The following morning, as the family ate breakfast, Donna had to ask her mother about the night before.

“Mom, when the tubing came off your breathing machine last night, were you calling for help?” inquired Donna, trying to explain the cries she had heard last night.

“No. I kept saying ‘Oh, my God, I’m gonna die’,” Betty replied.

Donna, confused by her mother’s response, ate her breakfast as her mind raced wildly. *What really woke me last night? The storm? No, a male voice. The wind? How could I explain the noise the radiator pipes made? Radiator pipes always bang in winter when the heat turns on. I woke up just in time to help mom. Had I not been*

awake, she would have died. Was it celestial intervention? A guardian angel or even God Himself? Who had cried for help? Where did the cries in the night come from?

Donna never discovered the truth of that night. Whatever happened helped her save her mother in time—the only thing that mattered.