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Don't Panic

by Sue Hitchcock

When my husband had a stroke, there was no panic. One minute he was well, the next he had collapsed and was unconscious. Adrenaline pumped, but decisions were made, not by me, and in an hour he was carted off to hospital. We were called in during the night to talk with a doctor, warning us that it was probably his last hours. They underestimated his will to live and by the morning, he was awake and even speaking a little. During the following three months in hospital there were improvements and several bad times, pneumonia and covid. Sometimes he would be asleep, unwakeable by me, then the next day cheerful and talking.

When I finally got him back, home again to retrieve his old life, things were not as before. Familiarity brought back all his old self, memories from eighty years, and he finally realised he wasn't thirty-two, as he had been claiming. Maybe this is an unwelcome discovery, but not so terrible.

The man who came home was not the man he had been. Slightly incapacitated, but able to walk and mountaineer upstairs. His memory up to the stroke was intact, but making sense of the present was not so easy. He was compliant, knowing I would be his nurse, remembering his drug routine and organising his hygiene. It was like having a son to look after and I found myself loving him in a new, renewed way. At first I was assiduous, he seemed rather fragile. Nightly I would lie in bed listening, hearing steady breathing, or not. Only then did panic flutter like a vulture in my chest. Was this the fear which hung anticipated like the sword of Damocles over my head?

No longer do I think constantly about his welfare. He struggled to regain control and my suffocating supervision was shrugged off. The last reality for me to accept came from a visiting nurse. "You must take care of yourself. It isn't unusual for a carer to die first. What would happen to your husband then?"