

WHAT HAPPENS IF I DIE WHEN YOU'RE AWAY?

by Enid Macken

It was a January day in 2004. I was on my way to Brighton Gardens, an assisted living facility where my father had lived for over a year. My husband and I were leaving on a trip that week, and I wanted to make sure everything was okay before I went away. It was a typical day in many ways. My father and I would do errands and visit his wife Mabel in a convalescent hospital. It became a day I will never forget; it was the last time I saw my father alive.

Dick, as my brothers and I called him in his later years, was waiting in the lobby as usual. He tottered out and got in the car. He didn't fasten his seat belt, but held it across his shoulders. "I don't want you to get a ticket," he had once explained as he maintained his position that seat belts were a nuisance.

The drive to Creekside Convalescent Hospital was a short one. As we were passing the library in downtown Santa Rosa, he announced he needed to use a bathroom immediately. He could not wait to get to a toilet, the side of the road would be just fine. I refused to stop in such a busy area.

The convalescent hospital was just a few blocks away, but we both knew the bathroom there wasn't a good choice for him. On an earlier visit with Mabel, Dick had gone off in search of a bathroom. It was not a good experience for reasons I never found out. He decided he would never again use the facility restroom, and the staff shared the opinion he should stay out of their bathrooms.

"There's a restroom close by in Julliard Park. It's right next to the street," I said trying to provide an alternative I was comfortable with.

He agreed, and I drove to the corner. My father, known for his unpredictable responses, did not go in the building as I expected. He opened the car door, stood by the curb, unzipped his pants, and went.

"You're embarrassing me," I wailed.

"Don't worry. I'll pretend I'm working on your windshield wipers," he replied.

With that, he leaned over my windshield and moved the wipers around, even though the day was sunny and they weren't needed.

Finished with this episode, we continued on to Creekside. Our normal procedure was for me to let Dick off in front and then find a place to park. Often I had to go a distance away, and the walk was hard on him. He would wait in the lobby, but this too had a history of problems. One time he decided to sit on an end table instead of a chair or couch which upset the staff. To those who hadn't known him earlier, this would seem to indicate some dementia. However it was consistent with the way he had lived for 92 years. He didn't worry about conventions. If the table looked more suitable, he would have sat on it at any age.

Usually I went by Mabel's room and wheeled her into the lobby where my father was waiting. This plan was the solution to another problem. It didn't work for Dick to visit Mabel in her room because of her roommate. I forget whether he became impatient with the roommate or the roommate complained about him. Anyway, it was best if we met in the lobby. On this afternoon Mabel was resting in bed, and the nurse thought she should stay there. So Dick and I went to the room where we spent time without incident. As we got ready to leave, Mabel seemed reluctant to have us go. She wanted more time with my father. Looking back, I wondered if she sensed these were their last moments together.

As my father and I drove back to Brighton Gardens, we talked about my upcoming trip, a nature cruise in Belize.

“What happens if I die when you’re away?” Dick asked.

I didn’t consider this comment a premonition of his death. For years, he’d mentioned dying, even as he continued to move through life energetically and full of plans. Once as he was leaving on a foreign trip, he’d told me not to have his body sent back if he died while he was traveling. He thought it would cost too much money.

We said our good-byes at the entrance to Brighton Gardens. I watched him in the dim evening light as he walked inside. He rocked unsteadily. He refused to use a cane because he believed it would make him more likely to trip. Every time I left him I felt a tinge of sadness. I wondered how many more days we would have together; I knew one day would be the last time.

A week later, the captain of the ship approached me at dinner and said a message had come for me about my father. I immediately responded, “Oh, I bet he died.”

Solemnly I followed the captain to the ship’s bridge where he connected me with my son Ron. Once the conversation began, the captain discreetly left me alone. I was correct. Dick had collapsed and died in front of the elevator at Brighton Gardens. We all knew he would probably die suddenly because he had a large aortic aneurysm. He had declined the risky surgery to repair it.

That night I was thankful my father died in a public area where he got immediate attention. I was also thankful for the closeness we’d developed since he and Mabel moved to Santa Rosa in 2002. Yes, some moments had been difficult. Both of them were stubborn individuals, but I hadn’t spent so much time with Dick in years. The next day I walked by myself on the white sands of a Caribbean beach deep in thought about how fortunate I had been to share my father’s final months with him.