

## Timing is Everything

There is a time, between dying and death, when a few patients regain lucidity, occasionally become energetic, and, in this space, reveal what they hold most dear. Some people say a name, others tell a complete story. Often these stories are about love but they don't always involve people. Sometimes they encapsulate a person's passion, and dreams, fulfilled or otherwise, are played out one last time.

Shelia's time came just before dawn and ended shortly after fallen leaves on a patio had been transformed by the sun until they resembled red and gold footlights on a stage. The row of poplar trees, from which they had dropped, surrounded her like an appreciative audience, and, I, her night nurse, took on the role of dresser and witness. Before that night she was Mrs. Gillies, the colostomy in Room 48. Afterwards — Shelia, dancer, dream-maker.

I was doing my final round when I heard a shuffle inside her room, then something being dragged across the floor. I pushed the door slightly, watched a dying woman climb on a chair and reach to the back of her closet. Not wanting to scare her, I waited until she climbed down with a small case.

"Now what's going on?" I said, easing the door wide open. "Not running away, I hope?"

"Ah good, you're here at last."

"If you needed me earlier you should've rung the buzzer."

"And wake the whole place? Now, Glenda, my make-up."

I was surprised she knew my name, we'd hardly talked. She was usually asleep. I walked over thinking, a bit of make-up, where's the harm?

She sat on a chair in front of her dresser, tucked a tissue around her neck. Across her dresser she spread some jars, pots, brushes and lipstick. On the right she placed a photograph of a young woman, hair like black silk gliding down an arched back. A body, sleek and sensuous, in a red dress that fell around her calves in frills and flounces.

"Me," she said, "during my Franco phase."

I picked up the photograph and, yes, it could have been her, same nose, cheek bones.

“You danced?”

“Help me do it again.”

When I hesitated, she pulled a flamenco dress from her case and rustled it in front of me.

“Olé!”

I followed her instructions; face, dress, shoes, in that order. Then painted her nails, tied ribbons through her hair and helped her put on a pair of gold Aztec earrings.

She floated towards the French doors, pulled back the curtains and stepped onto the patio. The sun, as though on command, rose and formed a magenta backdrop and I knew something special was about to take place.

Shelia, surrounded by autumn leaves, danced a summer story. She took me to Spain, introduced me to Franco, showed me how love looks when it flames red, knelt me on earth so dry it crackled, took me through the streets of Granada on a hot steamy night, sat me down in a cantina and had me drink wine from my shoe.

She took me across sand and sea and sky. I hardly remember carrying her back to bed, barely knew that I had undressed her, washed her, taken a rose from a vase and tucked it in her white hair; positioned her in a dead woman’s pose. When asked later how she’d been when I did my rounds, I said, “She had a good night.”

Even now I never experience dawn without hearing Shelia dance. And each autumn I take simple pleasure in disturbing the pattern of leaves.

**Maxine Alterio** is a principal lecturer and staff development coordinator at Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand with an interest in narrative approaches to teaching and learning. She is co-author of *Learning through Storytelling in Higher Education: Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning*, published in 2002 by Dunmore Press, New Zealand, and in 2003 by Kogan Page, United Kingdom. Her first book of fiction, *Live News and Other Stories*, will be released by Steele/Roberts, New Zealand, late in 2004.