

South of the Garden

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by Jeanette Stokes

One Saturday I wrought-iron crook, which I had never bothered to move from its place in the garden. Before long there were birds p



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Sue

by Jeanette Stoke

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Sue Versenyi never agreed to die. She did not want to die. She wanted to live to see her children grow up. She wanted to watch her garden bloom summer after summer. She wanted to write more poems, make more quilts, and teach more children to read and write. She didn't want to die, and so for days, and then weeks, she simply refused to do so.

Sue was strong, kind, warm, loving, creative, generous, and hospitable. She was a mother who poured her heart and energy into the care and guiding of her daughters. She and Adam created a home in which the life of the family was central. They shared meals and conversations around the table, they celebrated birthdays and a variety of religious and cultural traditions, they welcomed friends and strangers. Sue and Adam built a life that could be the envy of many and, by God, Sue did not want to leave it.

The last time I was with Sue while she was fully communicative, was one night in early August at the hospital after she had broken her leg. She would probably be dead in two weeks. (Proved that one wrong, as per usual.) Another doctor suggested there was more that could be done. She was in a lot of pain and it had been a particularly stressful day. But in came the girls with new purchases from Look Out and from Old Navy to show their mother, and the hospital room became a fashion show. We all laughed and talked and commented on the color and texture of the clothes meant for school a few weeks later. Sue was ready for lots more years of that.

Sue surprised us all. She kept breathing past her wedding anniversary, past the first day of school, 12 days past the day when the Hospice nurses announced she would certainly die that day. She kept breathing past my trip to Indiana, past Margie's weeklong trip to Seattle, clear into the holy woman Mother Meera's visit to North Carolina. No one understood why her body kept on. We may never understand.

When I wrote to a friend who is a Hospice chaplain to express my wonder at her living so long beyond all predictions and to describe the mix of anxiety and impatience that many of us felt, he asked, "On whose schedule is she doing her dying?" Sue and her Creator were right on time, he assured me, and they were up to something that would probably only baffle the rest of us.

Watching Sue breath on one of those last afternoons, I felt like I was watching a newborn with respiratory problems. With such a child, I might wonder why the tiny person bothered to make the effort. That is certainly what I wondered with Sue. It looked like such a painful struggle. I wondered, as others had, why she didn't seem to want to give up.

Give up? What are you, nuts? Sue? Give up? She clung to life, not in a fearful way, but in her own strong-willed, tenacious, insistent, stubborn, opinionated way. If ever I met a woman I wanted to be on MY side, it was Sue. Watching her, I was awed by the strength of the life

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