

Beachball, Kentucky

by Heather Fowler

This is a true story. A guy, Frederick P. Danes, ages gently in his home in Erlanger, Kentucky with his beloved wife Carla. He seeks to cherish her, aging war vet that he is, and if there is one trouble, it is that he uses a walker and she's getting older now, too, so from their upstairs condo, taking the trash out isn't easy. This, aside from the humiliation that it's a man's job he knows he can no longer can do. Literally. Cannot. Well, what happens next at your pleasant condo, if you're Frederick, is this: Carla takes the trash downstairs to your garage and puts it in your shared car, which is a Buick LaSabre. She can still drive.

She doesn't know what she's doing, so knocks the car in reverse somehow—jostles the gearshift maybe, and while she's getting out to grab one last thing outside the car, the garage door opens and she hasn't moved far away enough from the car to avoid getting dragged and killed below it as the car rolls free from the garage.

If you're Frederick in this moment, you are watching from that balcony and start to scream your fool head off. Maybe you just think you scream, and you might have screamed, but what you really do is clutch at your chest, black dots spanning each eyeball, your mouth frozen in fear, your voice leaking out but not with the volume you'd hoped, and your heart, aside from breaking inside as you long to help Carla and can't, has truly began to give out. During your own heart-attack, you cannot go downstairs, even if you might want to try despite your pre-existing disability, and anyway, Carla has been run over. You see some blood on her cheek. Her legs are trapped below the car. You are only, you know before you even feel the paramedics touching your head and scanning your eyes and checking your pulse, watching her die. It won't be like in WW2 when you saved your shrapnel fragged buddy and he could go home. It won't be like the nightmares you have when Carla is gone, because those you woke up from. It won't be like that beach-ball you lost one year at a beach in Florida that you and Carla just happened to go

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/heather-fowler/beachball-kentucky>»

Copyright © 2011 Heather Fowler. All rights reserved.

back for a few hours later and relocate only a mile down-shore, the red and purple and blue one. The one packed and brought here. The one now in the closet.

And later, after you get out of the hospital where you have been recovering, after your close thirty-something friend Glen comes over and helps you get back up to your place, after he stocks your fridge and hires a company to send caretakers over, after he does not neglect to hug you and show you some warmth each time he comes, you realize you are one of the few older people these caretakers ever encounter who is not senile, who is not unable to handle their bowels, who is not truly on the verge of dying—so maybe, you realize, Glen feels this caretaker hiring necessary for more than groceries and company to force you out because you refuse to leave your room most days. You fear he knows you've internalized that you are afraid of the living room and the kitchen—this you decide because you've confessed this to him once, right after Carla's accident and your heart attack. You can't spend thirty years with someone and still not see her, you admit. You remember, each time you walk out to the balcony— where you once laid prone to watch her die— that you must silently damn that gray car. You think about wanting to sell it and wash the blood still on the wheels right into her grave. But you cannot sell that car. You can't leave your condo. Glen will have to handle that.

And you talk to the caretakers who come about Hawaii and the life you knew. You talk about Florida. You talk about here. And you talk about Carla and tell them too how you can't stand to leave your bedroom because you still keep seeing her. If they are sympathetic, maybe, one by one, you tell them about that day she died and they hear your story, in horror. Then, you tell them about how the beach ball, to your shame, is the only thing you feel you have left of her that you can see well from the view from that stuffed yellow chair in your bedroom where you always sit by the open window watching the cars go by, but that the rest of the house is too full of her.

You tell them how she blew it up fairly recently when she spoke of a new desired vacation, inflated it early for the next trip, but how

you two never deflated it. You know, when they seem to pity you as you tell them these things, the caretakers, that they realize as you finally did, some sooner than others, that this job, the job of you, has been easy for a reason. It's not a sick old incapable man job, as Glen told the agency. No, Glen lied. He works, but you are special to him.

Could they instead be, you know they wonder after a time, here on a suicide watch? Because Glen could have brought your groceries and left it at that. You can cook. You don't need people around all the time just to watch you sit idly in your room. But from a new loose-lipped caretaker, you hear that "Watch the beach ball," was Glen's recent directive, as if he thought you might paint it with symbols or put your predetermined death date on it, which is why you tell her the whole conflated, deflated story of recovering the beach ball.

She says, "I'll be your regular now. I'll be helping with your rooms."

You tell her, "Look at this beach ball. Can you believe it still holds air? It's been months since it got blown up. Almost a year."

You make nice. You make nice. You curse Glen. You miss Carla. You hate the car. You don't want to leave your room though the new girl entices you with fresh bread and a show. You wonder how you'd off yourself at this junction, if you really wanted to—and whether Glen or a caretaker could even stop you if you planned it well—because you are a crafty old man and they can't control you.

And they come, keep coming, so you let them coddle and hug you. You tell them what you think they want to know while the grief sifts inside you like an ax in a bag, say things like—"The trees in Hawaii were beautiful! There was a lovely path if you went right at the lanai nearest the..."

But, what you don't say, what you want to say is: This beach ball is important to me, folks, though you don't know why, and Glen wants you to watch it because I look at it so much, but I look at it so much because it's the last place Carla put her living breath, the last place that stored it, and when I see her here in the other rooms but she's nowhere, old buddy—when I think I see her shadow and she's gone, sometimes I like to take a good nip off of that receptacle, suck out

some of that carbon dioxide she put in—only a little bit at a time. Cause her lips were there too. And I reclaim her breath. And if I wanted to off myself, compadre, let's just say I'd just suck this beach ball dry until I had let her CO2 take me away with her forever.

But your biggest worry is that, between now and then—because you do nip at her exhaled air here and there, or quite often you admit—on the day that comes when you are ready to make that leap into gone, you will have depleted your own stash of death fumes in the closet—you will not have her back, you will have taken every bit of her air left in this place, sucked it in hard and pushed it back out from your lungs, which will burn, burn, burn—and there will be nothing left.

Already, the newest caretaker has begun a subtle effort to reconfigure the space. As if moving furniture around will make the living room okay again. As if changing the shelves that dishes go on will make the kitchen dinette less hard to sit in and drink a cup of coffee. As if anything can take Carla out from here but your leaving here, too.

So you're careful later that week as you imbibe in that breath. Later that month, you stop imbibing at all, just press your lips to the out-thrust inflation device nozzle without opening it and suck.

The caretaker comes in to find you this way, a beach ball up-ended on your face, half-inflated, as you walk to the living room, on your walker, in an instant of bravery, and then sit on the couch with the soft plastic touching your lips and cheeks.

"You want me to blow that up?" she asks.

"Don't touch it! Don't ever touch it!" you shout at her. You do not tell her why. You put it in your room. You stare at it on your closet floor like you and it have escaped a close call. You go back out and apologize.

Later that day, Glen comes over. "You're doing good, pops," he tells you, though you are not his father. "Doing real good."

You don't say nothing about your day. About your trip out to the living room. About the ball. You don't want to. "Can you sell that car?" you ask, and he agrees.

