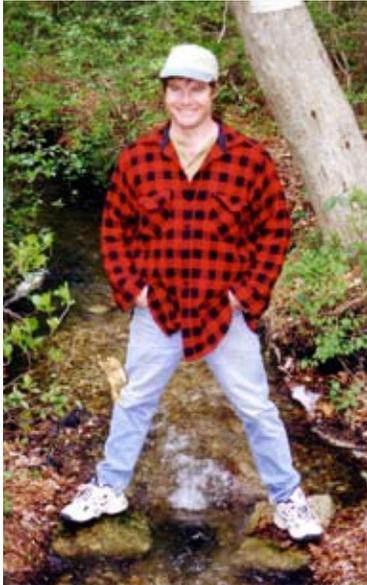


The House Across the Street

Submitted to Compassionate Care by Seth Carey, September 2003



For all of my life the house across the street from ours was always a privately owned residence.

My memory fails me as to the host of families who have resided there over the past forty years but it's always been a residence.

Sometime during the summer of 2001 some new people bought it. I didn't notice much, other than it now appeared to be inhabited by some cute women. I was quite single at the time, my now wife having just moved in--strictly as friends--and I was happy to make the trip all the way across the street to introduce myself as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

I met them and learned that they were not moving in to live there but to relocate their healing arts practice, and they would be joining forces with some sort of Lou Gehrig's disease service. I was still as of that moment blissfully unaware of what Lou Gehrig's disease was; when I heard of what my new neighbors were intending for the house directly across the street from mine, my only thoughts regarding them were "at least they'll be quiet."

As a decidedly asinine act, I had taken up the habit of smoking cigarettes at the tender age of thirty-four, and four years later decided it was time to quit. I had had perpetual postnasal drip for several months. So annoying and cumbersome was it that it would occasionally cause me to slur my words. I had been to my physician and was told it was allergies and there was little more to be done about it than to squish saline and Allegra up my nose and to take allergy pills. I knew the real culprit wasn't the pollen, but the twenty or so butts I was having each day.

I decided to quit smoking for real this time, realizing I would need some help, and went to see the psychologist I'd seen several times the previous winter when it looked like my mom was about to die from leukemia. She told me that if and when I ever decided to quit smoking, she would hypnotize me if I thought it would help. I took her up on the offer and smoked my last cigarette ever on the way to getting hypnotized.

I quit smoking but the perpetual river of snot in the back of my throat didn't seem to let up. It had been about six months of it, and I noticed that it was causing me to slur fairly frequently. In fact, it got to be so pronounced that when I went to the Lee-Side bar, I was told by the bartender that I was shut off after I returned for my second beer. That's when I knew it was something serious and not merely an annoyance.

I returned to my doctor for the sixth visit, got annoyed when I was told it was simply allergies, and made an appointment with an Ear Nose and Throat specialist. He squirted some numbing stuff up my nose and then shoved in an ungodly length of fiber-optic cable. In about five or ten minutes it was over and he gave me his diagnosis. Apparently there was nothing wrong with my nose or throat. My problem was neurological.

I made an appointment to see a neurologist at Brigham and Women's hospital in Boston. The earliest I could be seen was sometime in January, several months away.

I have always enjoyed a good laugh but now was finding it hard to control; I couldn't hold it in and once I started it was difficult to stop. This was true for crying as well; I found I was crying over TV commercials and anything with a contrived, 'touching' moment, which would normally nauseate me.

My ability to speak continued to suffer. Not only was I having trouble pronouncing words but also it was difficult to modulate the tones coming out of my mouth. I was getting pretty scared so I drove myself to the ER at Brigham and Women's. There they confirmed that my problems were neurological. They were also able to reschedule my appointment to see a neurologist to late November.

It was shortly after Thanks Giving when I was formally introduced to Lou Gehrig's disease and learned of its other name, ALS. This rang a familiar bell and a couple of days later I found myself walking across the street again, this time to find out about their ALS center.

It was the first time I had been in that house since I was eight or nine. The house has a relaxed, peaceful feel to it. I recall being tempted to lie down for a little snooze in front of the fireplace on one of several very comfy looking pieces of furniture.

I am not a New-Age-y type. My nickname on the water, where I was usually to be found knee deep in bluefish, was “cranky Yankee.” I like a good backrub but I lose interest when the subject turns to aroma therapy and the power of healing crystals, which, by the way, are just rocks as far as I can tell.

Although I noticed a bunch of books in the living room library with various holistic and alternative healing titles, it wasn't enough to make me feel uncomfortable, and I was still giving serious thought to taking a nap. I met with someone in the other room who told me Ron Hoffman was who I wanted to speak with, and he was not available at the moment. I left my name and number and told them I lived directly across the street.

I went home to replace my chimney cap. While I was up there 3 people stopped by, necessitating that I climb down from the roof each time. The last person to drop by was Ron. I still need to replace my chimney cap.

I showed Ron around my house and we talked for a couple of hours. He had many sensible recommendations regarding modifications to the bathroom, ramps and lifts to allow me to continue to get in and out of my house and enable me to continue to sleep upstairs as long as possible. He also had words of advice regarding dealing with insurance companies and steered me towards a good lawyer to advise me on such matters. Ron also recommended a neurologist. I am quite happy with his recommendation of neurologist; she's about the best I could hope for on every level.

He has connections with all kinds of people who can help in various ways: Speech therapists, wheel-chair mechanics, and acupuncturists, to name just a few. He said he was often able to supply equipment that I would be needing eventually. A short list of some of what he's procured for me to borrow includes walkers, massage table, massage appointments for me and my wife, a power wheel chair and a well used but functional, wheel chair van.

Frankly, I wasn't born yesterday and I know nothing is for free. I kept waiting for him to lay his pitch on me, whether it was a payment plan or enrolment in some sort of religion. It never came. I still wasn't sure so I breached the subject. I asked him what it would cost me for his help. He said that it wouldn't cost me anything. This made me even more skeptical and I suspected a religious slant. I told him I'm a confirmed atheist and that I doubt that I will change my mind about that. He said he has beliefs of faith himself but respected my views.

Now I was sure there was some hidden agenda. Nothing is for free. Virtual strangers do not do not offer their time and resources without a cost. It's been almost two years that I've known Ron and I am happy to say I was wrong to suspect that he was less than genuine. He's 100% the caring concerned person he claims to be. In the time I have known him he has helped in many ways.

I had been trying to find out what was wrong with me for the better part of a year. When I finally discovered what I had I was told, “You likely have ALS. There's no cure or effective treatment. See you in three months.”

Now, within the first couple of hours of my acquaintance with my new neighbor, Ron Hoffman, I had more information than I ever suspected was out there. It was a real stroke of good fortune for me to have blundered into him, especially when I did. I shudder to think of how much more difficult it would have been if not for Ron's help.