

A person stands on a wide, sandy beach at sunset. The sky is a mix of soft blues and oranges, with a large, glowing, pale moon in the upper right. The ocean is calm, and the person's reflection is visible in the shallow water.

THE RELUCTANT CAREGIVER

Reclaiming My Life After Caring for a Stroke Survivor

A Memoir

“A gripping memoir about the advantages of choosing self-care, even when it rocks our closest relationships.”

—Grace Kerina, author of *Personal Boundaries for Highly Sensitive People*

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Singing

June 2008 – Five Months After Stroke

Today Tim is going to sing a song. We are sitting in the small office of his speech therapist on a warm summer day. Tim has been coming here two to three times a week since his release from the hospital after the stroke. He continues to make progress on his expression of language and on understanding what he hears, but he still struggles to have even simple conversations.

He chose “Annie’s Song” by John Denver to sing today, likely because it is a song that has been stored in his brain for decades. He’s been practicing at home, but this is the first time I have heard him sing. Even though he starts out a little self-consciously, he relaxes after a few lines and sings the song with confidence.

“You fill up my senses...”

I am captivated, stunned into silence. His voice is fairly quiet but it is clear and steady and he sounds like himself. He pronounces each word accurately and is able to carry the tune. It is beautiful. The experience of truly feeling the presence of the old Tim is both strange and wonderful.

The therapist explains how music is stored in a different part of the brain—separate from the language center where Tim’s stroke caused the most damage. He can sing what he can’t say. Sadly, when he hears himself talk or sing, he still has no idea what is coming out of his mouth. His receptive aphasia is still wreaking havoc. He can still sing the ABCs but can’t speak them or understand them. He can sing this lovely song but can’t say the words unless he’s singing. He still struggles to put a

sentence together in conversation. It's astounding and heartbreaking and awe-inspiring, all at once.

When he talks, his voice is halting and broken.

When he sings, his voice is smooth and effortless.

When he sings, I can hear *him*. I can hear my husband.