

Beep...Beep...Beep

by Chuck Holmes

The most terrible thing is being almost dead. Being dead is not terrible. Being alive is not terrible, at least most of the time. But being almost dead with your faculties disconnecting one at the time, leaving less of you with every disconnection, that is the most terrible thing.

I can hear the doctors stirring around me. I feel one of them leaning against the bed. I want to tell him to get off the bed, but I can't talk. I can't see. I can't move my hands or my feet. And it's only by the beeping of the heart monitor and the whooshing of the ventilator helping me breathe that I know I am alive. That and the thoughts and images that keep coming into my mind.

"He still has brain function," one of the doctors says. Another doctor says something, but he mutters it so low that I can't make it out. I suppose that when the doctor says I have brain function, he means that I'm still alive. But I don't think so. It's just a matter of a few electric impulses between that and being dead.

There's a rustle as the doctors leave the room. I suppose that they are all in white coats and look very serious. But I can't tell, and I know that I'm neither better nor worse for them having been in my room, and I'm still not better nor worse now that they are gone.

All that's left in the room with me is the sound of the ventilator and the beep of the heart monitor. The beeping is slow and regular. And it's dull. Just the same beep...beep...beep. It's saying that my heart is still alive.

I try to think of something else to get my mind off of the beeping of the monitor. I think about when I was in college, when everything worked, and death seemed to be a long ways off. I don't know why with everything that's happened to me in eighty-two years I go back to college. But maybe it was the last time I really felt immortal. And it may have been the last time that when somebody asked me what I wanted to do, I felt like I had choices. I see pictures of the friends I had then when they were nineteen and twenty. I walk through the old buildings, but still I have to come back to the swoosh-beep that is really all I have left.

You'd think I would spend these thoughts wondering what's on the other side or if there is something on the other side. But I don't. I feel like all I have is the past and this piece of a present, and I don't think about the future.

I hear the door open, and I listen carefully, trying to figure out who it is. One of the nurses is easy; she snuffles. I don't know whether she has a cold or a sinus problem or what, but she always snuffles. I don't know why they let somebody who always snuffles work around sick people. I don't mind, because I don't think she can make me any sicker. Whoever came in just came in and left. It wasn't the snuffle nurse.

It's interesting that I don't feel hot or cold. All my life I've hated being cold. When I got cold my hands hurt. So Edith and I always argued over how to it should be in the house, and I would end up wearing sweaters. Now, since I'm here, I guess Edith can have any temperature that she wants. But I don't feel hot or cold. That feels strange.

My father died on his way to work. He left home one morning, got in his car and drove away — just like he did every morning. I was told later that he drove about two blocks down the street and pulled over to the curb. He had a heart attack, and he died. He sat there at the wheel, dead, for nearly three hours before somebody came out of their house to ask him to move the car. I was ten when he died. And it's only been lately that I envied him his death. He went from being alive to being dead without this almost death in between.

My mother, on the other hand, didn't die quickly or gracefully. She had a stroke, and she lay in the bed in a coma for six months while my sister, my brother, and I sat around her bed and talked about things as if she weren't there. I remember saying to my brother sometime near the end of the six months that I wished she would go ahead and die. I had gotten tired of sitting beside her bed watching her grow smaller and smaller and her limbs draw up closer to her body until she looked like the mummified remains of someone found in an ancient ruin. I wonder if she heard me say that, and if she did, did she also wish that she would go ahead and die.

For some reason I remember a science fiction story I read a long time ago. The hero was a head sitting on a pedestal under a glass globe with wires going to him. They had cut his body away a piece at a time, and then there was nothing left but the head and the wires that kept the head alive. It was strange when I read it. But now I'm like that. Just a head with wires keeping it alive. I can hear, and I can think. I can't do anything else.

The door opens again. I can tell that it's Edith because I hear the rattle as she sets paper bags down on the floor. Edith always brings things in paper bags. I suppose she brings books and snacks because when she comes she stays for hours sitting beside my bed. I wonder if she wishes that I would go ahead and die. She's never said that. In fact, when somebody comes in and asks her how I am, all she says is, "About the same." That has the same sanitized sense as the doctor's saying that I still have brain function. It says something without really saying something.

I wish I could feel Edith touch me. But either she doesn't touch me, or I can't feel it. Edith and I have been married for nearly sixty years, and in sixty years we got to know each other several times. I know that Edith was married to three or four people in that sixty years, and they were all me. She managed to survive that. And I managed to survive the different Ediths I was married to. I know that she's there somewhere beside my bed, but I don't know where. I don't hear her. I suppose she's just sitting there listening to the swoosh-beep, or maybe she's reading and waiting.

The door opens again and I hear Edith say something, but I can't tell what it is. Then I hear another voice, the doctor's voice. He talks louder than Edith does.

"I know it's a hard decision," he says. I suppose that they are talking about me. That's the only decision that they have in common. And I hear Edith say something else. It's her voice, but it doesn't sound exactly like her voice. It's muffled. Then I hear her sniffle like the sniffing nurse, and I understand. Edith is crying.

"I understand," the doctor is saying, "but he won't improve. He does have brain function, but his body will never get any better."

Edith says something else.

"No," the doctor says, "there's no pain. We simply stop the ventilator, and since he can't breathe on his own, he'll just slip away. He doesn't know anything."

I want so badly to raise my hand or to say something. I want to tell Edith that I love her, and that I'll still love her if they unplug the ventilator. I want to tell her that life for all these years has been good. And I want to tell her and the doctor the most terrible thing is being almost dead.

But I can't move. And I can't talk. All I can do is think. And wait for the silencing of the beep...beep...beep.