

Nights with E.B. White

by Sally Carton

Shortly after my mother died, I started reading *Charlotte's Web*. Or, I should say, listening to E.B. White read it to me on Audible. His reading is a marvel: gentle, playful and shot through with his affection for his characters—for Wilbur and Charlotte; the irascible rat, Templeton; and for a little girl's love of a pig. There is a deep humanity in each character and a love of place and time that can break my heart. The feel and smell of the barn are particular pleasures and took me back to a friend's barn in rural New Jersey: the magic of a barn swing, the delight of a hay loft. I could carry on for pages. Suffice it to say that I love every morsel of that book because I have savored every morsel of it probably over 250 times.

I had not thought about *Charlotte's Web* since my seven-year-old daughter (who is now an adult) wandered into the kitchen and told me that she had just seen Templeton in our back yard. While not enjoying the arrival of a Chicago alley rat, I adored her report. As our children grew up, I lost my connection to the poignant magic of children's literature. Then Covid hit, and I was separated from my mother, who was dying in an assisted living facility in Boston. Little did I know, *Charlotte's Web* would call to me.

Audible founder Don Katz related in an interview that Steve Jobs, when he first heard E.B. White read *Charlotte's Web*, "wept copiously." This detail was offered to illustrate how deeply Jobs got what Audible was offering all of us—and why the first iPod arrived "Audible ready." No longer attached to boxes of jumbled tapes or clunky devices plugged into the car lighter, we would be free to listen anywhere we wanted, dipping in and out of chapters and stories at will while jogging, gardening, riding to work. But it is the listen-under-the-covers that hooked me. Snuggled in the dark after my mother died, I felt connected to the safety and wonder of being read to. The little girl in

me reemerged. She wanted to be read to, and here was the kindly E.B. White whispering in her ear.

But before I rediscovered White, before Covid, I had been staying with my mother and managing her care. We still played scrabble and watched TV around her increasingly long naps, the steady thump and whir of her oxygen machine marking time, but now I was engaged in rounds of advocacy with the doctors and gate-keepers who could deliver more care. At last, the call came in that she was accepted for in-home hospice. I can still hear her clicking her tongue as she celebrated the moment, her index finger and thumb circled to signal perfection, as though announcing her pleasure in a crème brulee. “I’m in!” she smiled. She knew she needed more care and the relief was massive. With the pieces in place and my nearby Boston family encouraging me to “take a break,” I stepped away, reluctant to leave but deeply itching for the week in Florida with my husband, our kids, and their spouses. I kissed her goodbye and left for the airport, confident that I could grab a flight back if she needed me, still not imagining that we were close to the end. After all, she had already graduated from hospice twice. She always got better. Little did we know that just as Covid was spreading its tendrils, her heart was quietly but steadily weakening and the arc of these two events would converge in a family catastrophe.

Covid slammed the door on my return. It’s hard to remember now, but in those opening weeks as bodies piled up in cooler trucks in Central Park and panic and confusion reigned, there were no road maps. There weren’t even decent masks. Day after day as I desperately hatched plans to get back to her, the next day’s news would defeat them. I was split in half, levelled by grief and powerlessness. I did not know then that I would soon be part of a keening community of those separated from dying loved ones in 2020. It was Covid, week 1.

After learning that Covid would prevent my brothers and me from visiting her, my mother decided to stop eating. As a woman always capable of making firm and unalterable decisions, she was calm and clear when she called to deliver this news. If I ever doubted her strength and resolve, I would be convinced now. She had spent years preparing us for this moment, handing out copies of books about assisted suicide. But how could I hear that my mother was choosing to hasten death because she was

without me, us? I was insane with impotence. The family spun its collective wheels, and then my beloved and nearby niece, Alexandra, stepped forward to go to her. Alexandra self-quarantined before reaching the retirement home, where she was allowed to stay two nights. The next day, she held the phone to my mother's ear so that each grandchild could say their goodbyes. Her time up, she fled, gripped by fear of infecting others or being infected. Her gift was monumental.

The only remaining lifeline was a cell phone. Thanks to an extraordinary hospice worker and her iPhone, I read and talked and sang to my mother for many days. We all did. What I read and said is now a jumble. I landed on *Winnie the Pooh* for a time, but it sounded like such nonsense that I moved on. We were all groping. My brothers read poems. I'd sing the lullabies that my mother sang to me as a child while I stared intently at her on a tiny screen, curled and motionless. I made up stories in which she and every member of our family were piled into my father's little red motor boat for a picnic at a favorite beach. I tried to wrap her in my voice with images of Dad, her beloved long-departed Navy man, out on the other side of the sandbar, waiting for her. But it was the absence of touch that was our shared deprivation. Sequestered on the third floor of our house, I yammered on and then would hang up and wail, hopefully safe from the ears of my husband and daughter.

And then the miracle happened. In the final days of her dying, a routine had developed. I would call one of the hospice aides and ask if I could talk to Mom. The aide would get situated, and I would call back on FaceTime as she positioned herself beside Mom. As always, the aide's gentle voice guided me: "Okay, here she is. She is resting. Go ahead now." Mom was curled on her side, her ninety-nine year-old hands, relaxed and deeply veined, resting on the sheets, her baby-thin white hair floating like down over the pillow. Thanks to the morphine, she was peaceful in her ancient maple bed with its four low posts. It was a tiny double bed that she and my father had bought as newlyweds from a Sears catalog just after the war. When that bed made its last stop in her retirement apartment, the string of the medical emergency call button dangling overhead, she happily taped up a laminated copy of her Do Not Resuscitate Orders directly above her pillow, insisting, "Well, If the ambulance people come to get me here, I want them to know that I do not want to be resuscitated." The bed was as familiar to

me as anything from my childhood. As a little girl I used to crawl into it to cuddle with my parents, who made a “Sally Sandwich” by spooning with me—my mother’s body cupped around mine, and me with an arm around my father’s back. Just weeks before, I had lain there, stroking her head as I helped her relax into sleep. Then, my luggage packed for Florida, my hand pausing to caress the familiar wooden knob of the footboard, I had tiptoed backwards out the door.

Now, my perch on the bed was occupied by this kindly aide, who, through the magic of FaceTime was drawing me back to that room. The awkwardness was always there. Where to begin? “Hi, Mom. It’s Sally. I’m here.” The aide’s voice cut in with unusual vigor: “Look!” she exclaimed, “Her hand is moving. She hears you.” I was rivetted. The aide pivoted the camera down to Mom’s hand, and I could see her fingers moving ever so slightly. All my senses intensified around the glowing rectangle I clasped in my hand when, beneath my own hand, I saw the aide’s free hand slide into my mother’s hand. The illusion was dizzying. It was as though my own hand had reached out to my mother’s. The aide drew me deeper, guiding me, linking us. She spoke clearly and calmly, “Now she can feel you holding her hand.” It had happened. I was there. Enthralled, desperate. I was mesmerized by the illusion while my own senses experienced the warm touch of my mother’s soft skin. The aide moved the camera from our clasped hands back to Mom’s face. “Talk to her,” she whispered. Her eyes still closed, I say, “Mom, it’s me, I am here. I am holding your hand.” I was holding her hand. I had a profound awe-filled sense of connection, of touching the hands I knew so well. I was there, on the bed. A channel opened, and I knew it is time to tell my dear mother that she could go. I told her, and, again, I wove stories of her life with my father and three generations of offspring until sleep took me, too.

Later that night, the aide called me to say that my mother’s breathing had worsened. The camera was positioned, and I lay with her again and murmured comfort. More of the miraculous awaited. The aide interrupted and said that they needed to change her but would call back shortly. Like those in-person at a death bed, I was asked to step out of the room. Ten minutes later the aide called back and told me that my mother had died. And with a jolt of clarity, I came to know this: If the dying often wait for their loved ones to leave the room in order to let go of their hold on life, then I could

take comfort in knowing that my mother knew I was there and had died in the moments when I was asked to leave the room.

After her death, *Charlotte's Web* kept coming back to me. I needed it but I had no idea why. And then I found the Audible version. Night after sleepless night, I popped in my earbuds and sank into White's level warm voice and the world of the barn. Fern saves Wilbur, Wilbur grows and explores the Zuckerman farm, and the spell sweeps me away. Soothed at a 70% reading speed, I luxuriated in the comforting belief that White wanted to minimize my distress with his slightly slurred gentleness. A little voice in me was saying, "Thank you, Mr. White. Please don't leave yet. Stay with me until I fall asleep." At first, I was unaware of Audible's sleep timer and let the book run all night. Then, I found the timer and would wait until the night-waking, slide down under the covers to shield my husband from the glow of my iPhone, estimate how bad a night I was having, and set the timer accordingly. I'd even get that little jolt of pleasure that one gets when finally breaking down and taking a sleeping pill, knowing that relief is in sight. This was my pill: the predictability of the seasons, the innocence of Wilbur, the comfort of Charlotte, and the pleasure of being read to.

Our enclosed urban garden was our Farm during Covid. It protected and enriched, but it also imprisoned. In Chapter 3, "The Escape," Wilbur is lonely and despairing about the confines of his life. The goose starts shouting instructions at him to break free from his pen. White uses a sort of pressured gobble-speak for the goose, who shouts at Wilbur to make a break for the orchard: "You don't have to stay in that dirty little, dirty little, dirty little yard. One of the boards is loose, push on it, push push push on it and come on out." Escape you must! White's goose gobble pulled me out of whatever slumber was starting to shelter me from the unbearable guilt of not having been with my mother as she was dying. I wanted to shout at that goose that I did push and push and push. Then I gave up. Why did I give up? I should have been there, beating down the door to get to her, but I was trapped in my little pen and couldn't get out. Sometimes, I had to laugh at White's delightful silliness, but other times the drama of Wilbur's life helped me to name my predicament.

Death is everywhere on a farm. In the opening lines, Fern's father heads out to the barn with an ax to do away with the runt of the pig litter. The goose's egg does not hatch and is rolled away as a treat for Templeton. And, of course, after being saved by Fern, the sheep informs Wilbur that, as a spring pig, he will most certainly be killed and eaten in the fall. Goodness! I thought, such news in this book for children. But of course, that is the point: Wilbur, like all children, like all of us, must find out about death, and it is White's great gift to have found a way to bring this truth so gently to his readers.

Wilbur is terrified of dying. And White himself seems to find death unbearable, his voice wailing in desperation as he reads Wilbur's cry: "But I don't want to die!" It is Charlotte's sweet, confident maternal voice from above, reassuring Wilbur that he will be just fine, that she will find a way to save his life, that soothes every time. What I had forgotten was the problem that Wilbur faces: He cannot be with Charlotte when *she* dies. He had to leave her at the fair and return with the Zuckerman's to the barn. She will die alone. This slayed me.

Charlotte says very bluntly to Wilbur, "I will not be going back to the barn...I'm done for...In a day or two I will be dead." Hearing this, Wilbur "threw himself down in an agony of pain and sorrow. Great sobs wracked his body. He heaved and grunted with desolation." It is the cry made at the moment when a truly horrible loss penetrates to the core for the first time. It is the cry at the hospital bed, or after the phone call comes in. It levels us. How odd, I thought, that these three sentences describing a little pig's abject misery could reach me more deeply than countless Covid stories of worldwide grief and loss. I felt so young. I needed White to name it all for me.

A few days before the end, in total desperation, I had found a possible way to fly to my mother. Although uncertain about the logistics and about Covid infection, I told her that I would come. The response was swift and definitive, delivered with a force I had not heard in weeks. "No! No! You mustn't do that. Do not come." Then she fell silent, tired from the energy spent to speak those words. It took me weeks to register that she had been protecting me. I finally heard the echo: You must return to the Barn, Wilbur. My ever-practical mother, faced with this awful pandemic, knew what it meant: She would be dying without family. Never once did she cry out for me to be there. Never once. My god, the strength in that.

In the year after my mother's death, my nighttime listening was not a cure for insomnia; it was a cure for grief, a vessel on to which I could hop and ride out the waves of sorrow or dive into them and sob. During all the hours of listening, my greatest comfort came from the chapters that White devoted to the seasons and the stunning beauty of the moments when one season gives way to the next. These interludes mark the progression of time and hold the chord that is always vibrating: that winter and death will come but they are not an end. The poetry of those chapters soothed me and reminded me that the world is a beautiful place and that, if we pause and see and smell and hear and feel it, we will be enriched. The tremors in my body would still. And on a late summer evening when I'd step into the garden and hear the crickets, I'd think of little Wilbur marveling at the universe. Then I'd have more room to remember my mother's wonderful life.



Sally Carton is a psychotherapist living on the south side of Chicago. She came to psychotherapy through her love of literature and has used her training in psychoanalysis and a body-centered approach to trauma to help children and adults over the past thirty years. Now retired, she welcomes the opportunity to write essays drawn from her personal experiences and to spend more time throwing pots on a wheel.