

Oh brother, where art thou?

By: Larry Ratliff

It's noon. It's bright and sunny outside. Birds are chirping as usual and a couple of squirrels are playing Catch Me If You Can up, down and around the trunk of an oak tree.

My observations are dulled, however, by the deep, ironclad darkness of mental gloom only felt this severely by those who have recently lost a loved one suddenly. Without notice.

My brother Lannie, three years my senior and about 30 miles away, came down with viral pneumonia at the worst possible moment; just as an ice and snowstorm blanketed our city and rendered travel virtually impossible. "I'm fine," Lannie said between prolonged coughs on the phone. "I have some cough syrup. I'll take that and go to bed."

Day 2 was worse for the icy streets and Lannie's cough. Ditto Day 3, but we could not wait any longer. My wife Suellen called an ambulance and asked Lannie if he could get to the front door to unlock it. He did, the ambulance made it and Lannie was finally off to the hospital.

Slight snag, we had no idea which hospital he was taken to. One of us drove or fought to maintain control of the car as we slipped and slid, while the other called likely hospitals. It seemed like forever, but an emergency room nurse finally called us on Lannie's phone and we skidded our way to his bedside.

Lannie was diagnosed with viral pneumonia, the kind his pneumonia vaccine shot couldn't prevent or help. His oxygen level hovered dangerously low. Five days later, however, the hospital doctors and nurses got his oxygen level to peak, ever so briefly, at 90.

That signaled "go time" to the hospital staff, although to us – his family -- he was not ready to be sent off to a rehab facility. Not a skilled nursing facility, mind you, but a rehab facility with what I would describe as lacking in serious medical care. Clearly it was the wrong place for someone whose oxygen level rarely climbed out of the 70s.

We were told by the rehab staff not to worry, though, that everything was under control. It wasn't and we worried. Things – namely his oxygen level – were going downhill faster than we realized on the fifth day. There was an incident in the early afternoon when Lannie's oxygen level dropped to 43. I suggested that an ambulance be called for a trip to a hospital emergency room. The nurse in charge said, "We can do the same thing here that they can do in the hospital emergency room."

My wife, Lannie's son and I were taking turns spending the night in his room. Around 8 p.m. the nurse's aide was moving Lannie from the bathroom to his bed for the night. I said my goodbyes and left to go home and get some rest.

I was one block away when messages of "Come back!," "Turn around!" and "Please hurry" popped up on my phone.

My first thought was, "What have I forgotten?" When I saw the look of horror, shock and deepest hurt on Suellen's face as she waited for me at the rehab front door, I knew the worst had happened. Lannie had collapsed when they were trying to put him to bed. He

was unresponsive and sort of propped up in the bed when I got there. I got close and called his name three times. For all practical purposes my brother, my best friend, my closest connection to Earth, life and support was gone.

EMS officers sort of rushed in, although not quickly enough for those of us slowly slipping into an emotional abyss in the hall. They took turns performing CPR for 20 minutes, then found the slimmest glimmer of what might have been a sign of life. He was transported to a hospital emergency room just down the street, where a doctor fought for an hour to bring Lannie back before compassionately giving us the grimmest news.

That was almost five months ago now. The suddenness of it all has left our immediate family in an abruptly delivered state of shock and sorrow. For me, the sorrow feels like I'm carrying a couple of sumo wrestlers on my shoulders. We had a funeral, a really nice one, in fact.

Each day sends Lannie a little farther away from us, no matter how much we fight and lose repeatedly to keep him with us. The first thing we say to each other is not "Good morning" or "How are things going?" It's "I can't believe Lannie isn't with us right now, right here."

As I look out the window now and see the two squirrels gleefully playing Catch Me If You Can, it becomes me chasing my big brother around the oak tree, to be with him just one more time. To catch him.

But I can't.

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