

## Last Hours of Richard Rose by Bart Marshall

I met Richard Rose in 1990. I was in my forties—wife, kids, mortgage, angst. I'd been looking into esoteric matters for some twenty years by then and had a fair overview of the spiritual marketplace. None of it prepared me for Rose.

The events leading to our first encounter hint at magic, destiny and the hand of God. But then most people who knew Rose would tell you the same thing about how they came to meet him. That says a lot right there.

I knew him only five years before Alzheimer's took over, but no one has had a greater impact on my life. There are no words. How do you thank a man who gives Everything?

When the first emails arrived about his imminent death, I was reflective but not greatly moved. My mind paraded the appropriate palliatives: "We've all been expecting this... Alzheimer's took him long ago... I said my goodbyes last summer... It's just the shell of the body in that Weirton Geriatric bed... He's with us in ways beyond all that..." I checked my calendar to see when it would be most convenient for me to attend a funeral.

Days pass. Email updates arrive. Rose grows weaker--not expected to live out the day. Every day for a week he is not expected to live out the day. I check my busy calendar again. If he lives much longer it's going to be tight--

Without warning I stand up. "What the hell am I doing?"

It's a nine hour drive from my house to Wheeling. The whole way I worry my epiphany has come too late but when I get there Rose is still alive. It's Sunday evening. His wife Cecy and daughter Tatia are with him, along with Cecy's brother John and his family. Mike Casari, a student and friend of thirty-five years, sits in a chair at the head of Rose's bed. He's been there since Thursday and looks it. "Broke down in three different cars getting here," he says. "But I made it."

We all talk and laugh over coffee and snack cakes from a cart in the hall. Cecy is Rose's second wife and younger by decades. Her love for him borders on worship, and no one could have done more for him on his long journey into vagueness.

I haven't seen Tatia for years. In some ways she will always be for me the angelic twelve-year-old I interviewed for a documentary on her father, while in the next room he held a dozen students in thrall with hints and tips on how to "become the Truth."

"Do you ever listen to your father talk about these things?" I asked her, camera rolling. "Yes," she said, "sometimes. It's kind of boring." She's twenty-five now with a high-speed musical life in Nashville and a smile that lights up the building. She promises to send me CDs.

"Tatia and John need to get back," Cecy says finally.

"Go home," Mike and I tell her. She looks exhausted by the past nine days--nine years--of Weirton Geriatric... And she has funeral arrangements to make.

"His daughter Kathie and granddaughter Julie may be coming in later from Jersey," she says. "If they can find the place."

"We'll be here."

Reluctantly, gratefully, she leaves with her family. Mike steps out to give me some time with Rose.

After a decade-long decline through Alzheimer's into immobility, nine days ago he lost the ability to swallow. His Living Will specifies no heroic measures so feeding tubes and IVs were not inserted. He has been without food or water since. The final fast. His once-powerful body is frail, his face gaunt and drawn. His chest rises and falls with weak, labored breath. I put my hand on his shoulder and speak to him. His eyes open slightly. They are clear, dark, deep. I feel, as I always have, that they see clean through me.

Late into the night Mike and I sit by the bed and catch up in low voices--trying not to disturb Rose's roommate, George, on the other side of a thin curtain. Sometimes our laughter gets loud.

"We keeping you awake, George?" Mike says.

"Yes."

"Okay, good. Just checking." They have become friends these last three days and developed a vaudevillian banter based on George's grouchy demeanor.

"Who the hell wants to sleep anyway?" George says. "Plenty of that coming up soon enough."

We look at Rose and lapse into silence.

"I've been reading *The Three Books of the Absolute* to him," Mike says. "I'm reading it at the funeral. I figure reading it to him now is good practice. One time it felt like he was reading it to me with my voice."

Sometime after midnight I step into the darkened hall and see two figures backlit by the nurse's station. I go to them.

"Kathie Rose?"

"Yes. This is Julie."

I introduce myself and show them to the room. They are breathless and disheveled from driving fast and wondering if they would make it in time.

Julie is thirty and looks twenty. She wears a red t-shirt with a South Park character and the words: "Screw you guys, I'm going home." She carries a violin case, which she opens with some urgency.

Kathie gave birth to Julie alone, having left home to escape a strict father who once read her diary to investigate her virtue. ("All he found was page after page of how much I hated him.")

She bends now to stroke his head as Julie plays Mozart to break your heart on a 200-year old violin crafted by a famous European who made only 25 instruments in his long life. Though priceless, it was sold to her for next to nothing by a master violinist whose fingers were blown off in war. Listening, you understand why he wanted her to have it.

In Julie's purse is a return ticket to Norway where she's taking a Master's in Ibsen and doing her thesis on Duke Ellington's version of Edvard

Grieg's "Peer Gynt"--commissioned by Ibsen for his play. Her professors have refused to approve it—too obscure a connection to the literature, they said. "Screw you," she told them. "I'm doing it anyway." She also has her grandfather's eyes.

The night staff gathers in the hallway to listen as Julie moves from Mozart to bluegrass to Celtic paeans with effortless grace. Later they help us move Rose's bed into a large recreation room so we can have some privacy and be as loud as we want. We take full advantage.

"You're not leaving without a party, Grandpa," Julie says, kicking into a version of "Orange Blossom Special" we could swear makes Rose's foot move.

"You like that, don't you, Daddy," Kathie says, kissing him.

The staff brings us food and coffee throughout the night and can't stop saying, "If you all need anything, anything at all, please let us know."

Mike brings a white rose from a bouquet in the dining room and places it in a vase by Rose's bed. The bed is parked under a large window. A Madonna statue--the only religious object I've seen in the home—is being casually stored on the sill. Its outstretched hands now hover over Rose's head.

"Anybody bring a Bible?" Julie asks? "We can read him the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. He always loved the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm."

I am surprised to learn this. Rose's teachings are Zen-like, unique. I did not think of him as having a favorite passage from the Bible. Also, a month ago, out of the blue, I had felt compelled to memorize the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, though I have never been a Bible person myself.

"There's one in my purse," Kathie says.

Julie digs it out and wrinkles her nose. It's a *Good News Bible*.

"Jesus, Mom, this is like for third graders," she says.

"Hey, I'm just getting started on this stuff."

Julie reads in it silently for a few minutes then puts it down. "There must be a better one around here somewhere."

Two caregivers come in. "Okay if we turn him now?" Mike and I step out of the room.

"He was always such a modest man," Mike says. "I don't want to take a chance on seeing anything. The other day I stayed in the room while they turned him and saw his kneecap for the first time. It just didn't seem right."

As the night wears on we take turns staying awake with Rose while the others nod off in nearby chairs.

The next morning Mike and I walk the halls and stop by to see George.

"You're looking good this morning, George," Mike says.

George glances up. "You're not."

A few minutes later his wife arrives and they start fussing at each other about things in general. Mike and I leave. Later she stops by the rec room to see Rose and tells me about her life.

"Thirty-eight years in a steel mill office. Children and whatnot, this and that. It never ends."

"Yes," I say, "Um hmm..."

"I've already buried three husbands."

The punch line triggers in my head ("Had to--dead, you know.") as I nod sympathetically.

Julie and Kathie want showers.

"There's a Holiday Inn five minutes away," Mike says.

He and I decide to split a room and get cleaned up ourselves. The three of them leave and I sit alone with Rose. His eyes open slightly and I say a few things. I watch him breathe. Fifteen labored breaths, then forty-five seconds of apnea—no breath—then fifteen labored breaths to catch up. It has been his pattern. His eyes close. I recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. His eyes open. I recite it again. Mike returns.

"Clean man," I say absently, an offhand acknowledgement of his combed hair and fresh clothes. He looks at me, eyes glowing, then pours coffee. Later, as we sit at Rose's bedside counting breaths he turns to me. "Did you say 'Wingman,'?"

"What?"

"When I came back from the hotel, did you call me 'Wingman'?"

"I said 'clean man.'"

His shoulders droop. "Oh."

An attractive young nurse named Erin comes in to check Rose's vitals. She touches him with great tenderness and shakes her head.

"What?" I say.

"No way he should be alive."

"He's always been strong."

She nods a bit. "Still..." She starts to leave then turns back. "Can I get you all some hot dogs? We're having hot dogs today."

"You don't have to do that," I say without thinking. She's a nurse, after all, and has more important duties than waiting on us.

Her eyes flare. "I know I don't."

I sense my mistake. She has been with Rose for years perhaps, monitoring his decline, unable to help. "Yes, please," I say. "A hot dog sounds good."

The others say yes to hot dogs and Erin leaves. Seconds later she is back. "I'm sorry I snapped at you," she says. "It's just that... I feel I'm part of the family, and—"

"I know," I say. "I'm really sorry."

"We're not supposed to cross the line. They teach us not to cross the line."

"It's got to be hard."

"I read one of his papers, you know. Somebody left it here." Her eyes light up. "It's how I *think*. What he says in there is how I *think*. I've never heard it said before... God I wish I could have known him." She takes a deep breath. "You want cole slaw, too?"

I nod. "The works."

Later she leads us to a gourmet coffee shop and buys us expensive drinks with homemade whipped cream. Her shift is over but she doesn't want it to end. It seems she is on the verge of returning to the home with

us, but there is just no precedent for such a thing. "I'll see you tomorrow," she says finally, knowing it's unlikely.

At the home we wait for the elevator with a caregiver we've never seen. She smiles at us and says, "You must be Erin's family."

Back with Rose, we assume positions around the bed. His breathing is the rhythm of our world.

Cecy stops by. She looks good, strong, almost cheerful. She embraces Kathie and Julie. "I can't stay," she says. "I need to go by the funeral home. Just wanted to see how you all are doing." She pulls up a chair. "I'll just sit a minute."

Suddenly tired, I move to a recliner. Julie starts to play and I drift off to sleep. Sometime later I awaken to the strains of "Ashokan Farewell." Cecy is sobbing uncontrollably. Kathie is holding her tight.

"Go ahead," she whispers. "Let it go."

That evening a matronly nurse takes Rose's vitals. "I can't get a blood pressure reading," she says. "He's close."

As if to punctuate the point, Rose coughs, then lapses into apnea, his breath barely discernable. Kathie asks Julie to play a ballad. The soft strains of her violin soothe the room as we gather around the bed. After a few tunes, Julie puts away her violin and joins us in silence.

I look up from Rose's face to take in the deathbed tableau. From my angle the Madonna's hands are upon Kathie's head as she strokes her father's brow with impossible gentleness and speaks to him in hushed tones. Julie sits beside her weeping. Several caregivers have drifted in to stand nearby respectfully. Outside Rose's window, Fourth of July fireworks go off in the near distance... I am in awe of the perfection of the moment.

I look back to Rose. His breath becomes less labored. We wait, hardly daring to move or breathe ourselves... And we wait. And wait. Then, in a completely relaxed gesture we have not seen before, Rose yawns. Not a small weak movement, but a huge gaping yawn. Mike and I exchange glances.

"Is there such a thing as a death yawn?" I wonder out loud.

"I don't think so."

We go back to waiting. Rose yawns big again, as if to say, "You're boring me with the dramatics."

I turn to Mike. "He's not ready."

Mike nods. "We are, but he's not. Now we've got that to think about."

"He's waiting for someone," says one of the caregivers.

"Or for someone to leave," says another. They drift out. Mike and I walk across the large room to the coffee cart.

I look back at the bed. Kathie sits there alone, stroking her father's brow, speaking to him in whispers. I'm surprised to discover I can read lips. "*I love you, Daddy. I've always loved you. You know that right? You know that...?*"

I take her a coffee.

"We did some head-knocking, me and him," she says. "Do you think he understands us?"

"Yes," I hear myself saying. "I think he understands everything."

In the middle of the night Mike and I sit with Rose as Kathie and Julie sleep nearby. A caregiver comes in and stands at the foot of the bed. She is built like a linebacker, with short, slicked-back hair and a black dragon tattoo that covers most of one calf.

"First thing I always do when I start a shift," she says, "come visit Richard." She pats his leg. "How you doing, baby?"

"Thought we were going to lose him earlier tonight," Mike says.

"He'll go when he's ready and not a minute before--it's his show." She pats him again then turns to us.

"Thought I was gonna lose one of my own tonight," she says. "Just came from the hospital. One of my boys—I got four boys--went through the windshield in a wreck and broke a phone pole with his body. All he got was badly bruised, though--he's a heavyweight boxer. Got the call and drove eighty-five all the way to the hospital, cop cars wailing after me. By the time I pulled in there was six of 'em behind me, lights flashing. I tossed my wallet and keys on the seat and told 'em 'Leave the ticket in the car' then run inside to my boy. He weren't the one driving. The boy driving's had eight wrecks in a year. His mother never liked him. Neither do I, but I feed him and let him sleep at the house some. A real annoying kid. I've had to stick a gun in his face a few times to get his attention. I got fifty guns, license to carry. My grandson's two years old and's got four guns—real ones that I give him. I love guns, love hunting. Went into labor deer hunting once but refused to go to the hospital till I got my buck. Got me one, too, then went on in and had the kid. Week later I was hunting again."

By now Mike and I are laughing and she's grinning big. "You're one tough mamma," I say.

She snorts. "I'll tell you who's tough," she says, cutting her chin towards Rose. "That one there. I'm a hilly, raised in the hollers. I knew about him before he came in here. Lot of folks did. He's a good man but he didn't take no shit."

We laugh. "That's for sure. "

She pats Rose again. "I'll be back in awhile, baby." At the door she turns to us. "If you all need anything, anything at all, just let me know."

In the morning the matronly nurse checks Rose's vitals and shakes her head in amazement. "In thirty years I've never seen anything like it," she says. She puts her hand to his neck. "God bless you, Richard."

One wall of the rec room has several doors which we now learn are offices. The holiday weekend is over. People parade through as they go about their work. The staff arranges to have another resident moved so we can have a private room. We roll Rose's bed down the hall and settle in.

In the intimacy of the smaller space we tell stories about ourselves and life with Rose. At one point Kathie laughs at how her father characterized some of his students to her in the early days. One was a "buffoon," another a "dishrag," and on and on. None of it sounded good.

"I hate to think what he said about me," Mike says.

"He said you were a good man."

"Whew, dodged that one--"

"And a loyal friend."

Mike nods. "I'm short on a lot of things, but loyal I got."

"It's a good thing to be," Julie says.

Mike becomes reflective. "I drove Mr. Rose to a southern college town once, where he thought he'd be lecturing at the university—like he did on most trips. Instead though, the sponsoring group took us to a big suburban house full of well-dressed couples. There was food and wine and music in the background, and a wing chair set up for Rose on a small platform. Looked like a pretty good setup to me, but I could tell Rose didn't like it. I think he felt like he was the entertainment for a wine and cheese party. Anyway, we got separated in the crowd as we arrived and I went to get some food. About a minute later I hear his voice bellow out above everything: 'Mike, are you with me?!' I couldn't see him so I just yell out, 'Yes sir, Mr. Rose!' And he yells, 'Let's get the hell out of here!' Which we did.

Mike shakes his head and smiles. "That was maybe the greatest moment of my life... 'Mike, are you with me?!'... How many times do you get a chance to answer a question like that from your teacher?"

That afternoon Sandy Beigelman, a student from the early days, stops by. He has come from Florida. As we talk around the bed a thunderstorm approaches. The room darkens. Rose's breathing takes on a different pattern and sound. He seems restless, uncomfortable. His mouth moves as if trying to speak. Erin comes in and stands by the bed. Rose's breathing becomes raspy. Conversation stops.

"His lungs are filling up," Erin says. "It happens when the heart fails."

Julie is alarmed. "Will he drown?"

"No."

"I don't want him to drown."

"He'll die before that happens," Erin says. Rose's raspy breathing gets louder. "It's the 'death rattle.'"

No one speaks.

"Anyone mind if I read something?" Mike says.

"I have rounds..." Erin says absently, then sits down.

Mike opens one of Rose's books and reads:

*"Out of the valley of the river came a wanderer. Peace was in his eye and his soul was wrapped in Nirvana. Peace to the wanderer.*

*O Eternal Essence, I was that Wanderer. I it was who left the gardens of tranquility that I might labor for Truth..."*

Thunder rumbles in the distance, then the first lightning flash, as in a strong and moving voice Mike reads *The Three Books of the Absolute*, Rose's long epic poem about his intense realization of Truth at the age of thirty—fifty-eight years ago.

*"For the keeper of the House is gone, and all that remains testifies that he never was. Exploding thunder shakes its walls, and heaven and hell are within its region. For All is within that House, swelling it to burst its*

*comprehension. All joy is here, and all of joy is pain, torturing the House that cannot contain it...*

Rose's body relaxes and his breathing calms. I look around at the tableau and marvel at how much more perfect this scene is for Rose's death than the scene I thought so perfect last night. The room falls into deep and abiding rapport. Lightning flashes. Rain pounds the window. Time passes, timelessly...

*"The universes pass like a fitful vision.*

*The darkness and the void are part of the Unknowing...*

*Death shall exist forever...*

*Nothingness is Everywhere...*

*Silence is forgotten...*

*All that remains is ALL."*

The room stays silent for a long time. Kathie weeps quietly. She looks across to Erin. "My Daddy wrote that," she says.

"I thought so."

"And I never read it," Kathie says, almost to herself.

"He's so peaceful," someone says.

Julie's face is glowing. "The reading... It's what he wanted to say."

Erin checks Rose and shakes her head in wonder. "He's stable now."

Again, it is not the time of Rose's choosing. Erin continues on her rounds. Sandy says his goodbyes and leaves.

Later that night the four of us fall into a familiar pattern—talking about our lives as we listen to Rose breathe.

"I was his favorite grandchild," Julie says.

Kathie nods. "It was obvious."

"He gave me chocolate donuts when I was two--"

"Her face was covered with 'em—"

"They're still my favorite—the kind he gave me, not fancy ones--"

And on into the night. Finally, Kathie gives in to the urge for real sleep. "A couple hours at the hotel and I'll be fine," she says. Julie drives her.

Mike and I sit on either side of the bed. I stroke Rose's shoulder absently as we talk.

"Do they tell you to do that in hospice training?" Mike says.

"Do what?"

"Touch the person."

I shake my head. "Just something I do, I guess."

"I can't do it."

"People are different."

"Only time my father ever touched me was to beat me," he says.

We stay silent for awhile. He watches my hand on Rose.

"No matter who it is, dying's not easy," I explain. "I figure it can't hurt."

Julie returns with a six-pack of Dasani water bottles she has emptied and filled with Smirnoff Ice—to get around the home's no-alcohol rule.

"Special water," she grins, handing them round.

Mike raises his over the bed. "To Mr. Rose."

"To Mr. Rose."

"We love you, Grandpa"

As midnight passes into Wednesday Rose's breathing is no different than when I arrived Sunday. I begin to accept that I might not be here when he dies. I have a plane to catch Thursday for a trip I can't get out of and a nine-hour drive home. I figure I need to leave by noon to make it happen and start thinking in terms of logistics.

"I better get some sleep," I say. "I've got a long drive tomorrow."

Mike needs sleep too. "I'm wide awake," Julie says. "I'll come get you all if there's a change."

I lie down in the rec room and instantly fall into a deep sleep. What seems like seconds later Julie is waking me, excited. "Hurry." We half run back to the room. Rose is the same. Mike is there.

"Did you see it?" she asks him.

"See what?"

"His eyes popped open," she says, "wide open. He looked over to that corner and his eyes followed something across the ceiling then he tried to talk and for a second I thought I might understand him."

"Whoa."

"Yeah. I'm thinking, that's different--I better get the guys."

I pull up a chair and settle in for another round of breath watching. "Any of that Smirnoff left?"

An hour later I go back to the rec room to sleep. Again, it seems only minutes before I am awakened—this time by my cell phone.

"You need to come," Mike says.

In seconds I am there, standing at Rose's shoulder. Mike stands at his other shoulder across the bed.

"Where's Julie?" I say.

"Getting Kathie from the hotel."

Ada, one of the caregivers, hovers nearby, her face more solemn than I've seen it. She shakes her head. In a flash I realize that this is really it, the final tableau. I also realize I'm not ready.

We stand frozen like statues, watching his breath--even, gentle. Then, a few minutes later, stillness.

Ada gets the duty nurse. She holds her hand to his neck, then nods and strokes his cheek with great tenderness. "This one I won't forget."

Ada hugs us tearfully, "God bless him," she says. "God bless him."

They leave us alone. First light illuminates the window. The world is very quiet.

"What time is it?" Mike says.

"Five-fifty. Don't know if my watch is right. "

"It's the standard now."

"One minute A.R.," I say. "After Rose." We laugh.

"This is the only place I ever wanted to be," Mike says, "at his right hand."

I touch Rose's head and say a silent goodbye.

"I guess now's the time," Mike says. His hand hesitates, then moves to Rose's shoulder and rests there lightly. "Goodbye, Mr. Rose."

"Wingman," I say.

He looks up and smiles. "I'll call Cecy," he says, and steps into the hall.

I stare at Rose. After three days of hanging on his every breath I almost expect him to draw another. I recite in a low voice:

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."*

Mike comes back and we stand in silence with Rose. Kathie and Julie arrive in a rush.

"He's gone," I say.

Kathie goes to the bed. "Daddy...?"

Julie hangs back and covers her mouth. "He's gone?"

"His head's warm," Kathie says, as if there's hope.

Julie's eyes overflow. "He left without me."

Kathie kisses her father's forehead. "It's me he didn't want here."

I put an arm on Julie's shoulder. "He waited for the children to leave," I say. "It's a common thing."

Julie watches her mother. "This was for her," she says quietly. "I'm just here to witness. I think that's my purpose in life—to be a witness."

"It's a good thing to be," I say.

"This was for all of us," Mike says. "His final gift."

Julie breathes deep. "Yeah, I know... And he wasn't about to leave until we got it all."

Sometime later we collect Rose's things. Mike takes the white rose from the vase and gently wraps it in cellophane. He holds it out to Kathie. "Since you're his daughter, you get first dibs."

She hesitates. She wants it more than anything. "In that case, I give it to you," she says.

Mike exhales relief. "Thank you."

Cecy calls to tell us Tatia is stopping by on her way to the airport. "I told her not to try it," Cecy says. "She has to make that plane. But you know Tatia... She needs one more goodbye, I guess."

Twenty minutes later Tatia arrives in a flurry. She looks at her father in silence for a moment then starts sobbing like she never saw it coming. Nothing prepares us for the thing itself.

"Oh God," she says finally. "I have to go."

"Wait," Kathie says. She fishes in her purse and hands me a camera.  
"Get the three of us."  
The Rose girls wipe their cheeks and get their smiles ready.  
"Dry your eyes," Tatia says. "This is for Daddy."



Kathie, Tatia, Julie