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Is that you, Dad, or a javelina?

A common way people feel the presence of a loved one who has passed is when they see a butterfly or a bird, hear Dad's favorite song, or eat a piece of pie like the one Mom used to make. I think of my mother when I hear birds chirping as they peck at the seeds from my birdfeeder, and it brings me comfort.

I felt my dad's presence with me last week in a startling way when I was in Prescott, Arizona, standing in the driveway of the beautiful home he built at the top of Stoney Ridge Road. I was writing a note asking the current owner, who did not answer my knock (the doorbell had been removed) if we could return later and go inside.

I heard a deep guttural snort and looked around to see a full-grown javelina. This wild boar-like animal looked like it weighed 300 pounds, with dark, coarse hair, short legs, and a pig-like snout. Sharp canine teeth protruded from his jaw as he sniffed around for food. My first instinct was to walk quickly down the driveway to the car, where my husband Paul was looking for something to stick the note to the front door.

I didn't think Dad was sending a mystical message quite yet, but I realized that the scary-looking wild pig seemed intently focused on finding food and ignored me. When Paul arrived with a Post-it note, the hairy creature ignored him as well. I finished my note and stuck it to the front door while he snapped pictures of our furry friend, who seemed to pose for him. We didn't look back as we walked to the car. The javelina meant no harm.

My parents spent 30 years raising five children in a ranch-style house built on a floodplain (unbeknownst to them) in a small town in Ohio. The local creek regularly overflowed its banks, flooding the entire neighborhood and filling our basement with water up to the top step.

When they retired, my folks moved to Prescott and built their dream home with floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on a stunning view of the San Francisco Peaks. Paul and I have happy memories of sitting next to the fieldstone fireplace that rose to the vaulted ceiling as we watched the sun drop behind the mountains. We cherish the memories of sitting with Mom and Dad after dining at the Hassayampa Inn, enjoying our leisure time.

After a harrowing trip up and down the twisting and turning road, getting nowhere close to the house, we were dejected when we decided to turn back. The GPS showed Stoney Ridge Road, but when we got there, after being away for 24 years, a huge golf course and gated housing development had been built. We flagged down the mail carrier, who wasn't sure that street was on his route.

I texted my brother in Illinois to see if he might remember the house number – a long shot. He responded immediately with a text: 2002. A miracle! It got better - when I put the house number in the GPS, we were directed to their house, which was a few blocks away.

My note to the homeowner said we were leaving early the next morning. I checked my phone frequently for the rest of the day, but no call came. We were on the road by 7:00 a.m. the next morning.

Halfway home, the phone rang. The house's owner was a 90-year-old lady who said she was home when we came but was in the shower. She and her husband had bought the house from Dad. She would have been pleased to show us her home.

Long car rides can inspire reflection, and Paul said to me, "That javelina was your dad." These mystical moments often feel like puzzle pieces that have been dropped into our

laps. I replied, “That makes sense. Dad wants us to remember his house as it was when he and Mom were alive. It was his pride and joy, and he wants to keep it that way—his.”

You have to know my dad to understand, and we both did. Sending the javelina was quintessential Bob Vallee, a plain-spoken man who sent a clear message from beyond. It is a bittersweet memory this Father’s Day.