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She Went to Sleep and Woke Up Forty Years Later

By Ron Laytner, *The Straits Times*, April 5, 1998

The real-life story of Annie Shapiro - who fell into a coma at age 50 in 1963 - is more remarkable than the movie based on her miraculous re-awakening.

When she suddenly awoke nearly 30 years later in 1992, she was a 79-year-old granny, devastated by her appearance and the way the world had changed.

Just after she emerged from her years of darkness, she told me: "When I went to sleep, I was a darn good-looking woman. But in the mirror, all I see is an old lady with bags around her eyes, wrinkles and grey hair.

She could not believe that her husband Martin was an old man of 81 and that her teenage son and 25-year-old daughter Marilyn were middle-aged. She was awe-struck to learn about cordless telephones and spaceships flights.

The talented business-woman, who had run two apron shops near Toronto, Canada, before her illness, fell into a coma on Nov 22, 1963, aged 50.

She was watching news reports on the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy on her black-and-white TV set when she suffered a massive stroke.

For the next two years, Mrs Shapiro was totally paralysed, with her eyes staring wide open. Her husband would put drops in her eyes every few hours to keep them from drying out.

Mr Shapiro, a steel foundry worker, said he dressed and fed her "like a totally helpless child."

"She couldn't think or walk," he said.

At night, he lay next to his sleeping beauty in the darkness. He consulted experts, but no one could help her.

After two years of physical therapy, he finally got her to the point where she could sit up and walk,

assisted on either side. She could not see but could eat simple food.

As the years passed, Mrs Shapiro's son and daughter married and had two children each, and most of her friends died.

The Vietnam War ended, astronaut Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, Richard Nixon resigned over the Watergate scandal, communism collapsed and the world entered the computer age.

During her long sleep, Mrs Shapiro's body began breaking down. She had cataract surgery, a hysterectomy and a hip replacement.

But amazingly, on Oct 14, 1992, she suddenly snapped out of her coma. Mr Shapiro, who had retired and moved his ill wife to a retirement community in Florida, was flabbergasted.

"I was lying beside her in the bed," he said, "when she sat up and said: 'Turn on the television. I want to see the I Love Lucy show'. It was like a dead person come to life."

Mrs Shapiro got her first shock when she realised the TV was in colour, not black-and-white. But she was really stunned by her husband's grandfatherly appearance and her own wrinkled face.

"When she first looked in the mirror, she wanted to die," said Mr Shapiro. "She hollered and then cried over all those lost years."

Her first thoughts were for her son Marshall. The day before her stroke, Mr Shapiro had kicked the 16-year-old youth out of the house because he had crashed the family car.

"She wanted me to bring our son home," he said.

As he dialled Marshall's telephone number in Toronto, he told his wife that her boy was now aged 48, married and father of two.

At first, Mrs Shapiro was afraid to get on the line and talk to him because it was a cordless phone. "The phone didn't have any wires," she told me. "A voice was coming out of it and I thought it must be magic."

Then she asked to telephone her sister Rose, only to be told that she and her husband were dead - and her three brothers had died, too.

Mrs Shapiro's daughter Marilyn Pomerantz, 55, flew from Canada to Florida to help her mother adjust.

As the first shockwaves ebbed, Mrs Shapiro desperately tried to catch up on what had happened in the world. The woman who had been silent for 30 years stayed up around the clock for two days and did not stop talking.

Dr Glenn Englander, who was treating her for high blood pressure the day before she awakened from her coma, called her recovery a miracle. "I gave her something to lower her blood pressure," she said. "If I did something unknowingly to help her, I'd like to find out so I can do it for others."

The most touching part of the miracle was the renewed romance between Shapiro and her husband, who had cared for her all those years, refusing to have her placed in a nursing home.

"When I made my marriage vows and promised to stay together in sickness and in health, I meant it," said Mr Shapiro on a national TV show, "not like the people of today." Our romance began all over again.

"We both could hardly walk, but Annie wanted me to take her dancing," he said.

Sadly, her husband died three years ago. And now, Mrs Shapiro, 85, lives alone in a Toronto nursing home.

According to her daughter, she sleeps a lot but when she is awake, she often time-travels between tragic 1963 and the good final years she had with the man who loved her forever.

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