

The Drama of Dying

A cold shudder gripped my body as I read the label on my mother's medication. 'Dad, these are *only* pain killers. What's going on? What did the oncologist say?'

My father flinched and walked away – as he did whenever I probed him about my mother's prognosis. So, there I was in the cancer clinic, surrounded by patients sitting slumped in silence, the dark pall of anxiety worsened by the interminable wait.

At last! We were summoned to the examination room.

'Dad, why don't you go and get a coffee and I'll go in with Mum?'

The roleplay began. My mother shifted in her seat and cleared her throat, adjusting her coat which had fallen open exposing her withered legs. She put on a smile when the principal actor – the treating specialist – sauntered into the room. Avoiding eye-contact, he flicked through her medical record.

'Ah, Mrs Lopez, how are we feeling today? How's the pain?'

I moved my eyes from his face to hers. She dropped her gaze and shrugged her shoulders.

'Oh, alright, I suppose. The pain isn't too bad.'

She'd placed her faith in the medical system and wanted to believe they were going to cure her. There was no talk of the hopelessness of her condition, no mentioning the fact that she was going to die a lingering death. Both she and the doctor stuck to the script: the doctor initiated the verbal interaction, and my mother's submissiveness prevented her from questioning – normally outspoken, she seemed compelled to play the role of 'compliant patient'.

'Doctor, is further chemotherapy an option for my mother?'

The ticking of the wall clock punctuated the silence.

'I suppose we can start at the beginning and go through all the therapies that she has already had, but I doubt they would be effective.'

'What about alternative therapies?' My mouth was dry, my brain clutching onto any possibility of a cure.

'There's no documentation which validates their success.'

He was politely evasive; I was politely inquisitive. Throughout, my mother sat silent, a 'non-person'.

There I was asking about further treatment, when I wanted to ask how long she had to live. But that was not in the script. So, when the consultation ended, and the doctor left the

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room, I followed him out. When we were ‘off-stage’ I asked my question and he divulged that my mother wasn’t expected to live longer than four months.

Composing myself, I re-entered the examination room. My expression masked, pretending nothing profound had been discussed, I was colluding with the doctor to protect my mother from suspecting the worst. My complicity in the deception had begun. Could I carry it through to the end?

Over the next few weeks it became obvious that no one was going to discuss the matter – either amongst the family or with my mother. I lost focus at work, avoided conversation with my colleagues and often fled to the locker room in tears. At night, I dropped into a fitful sleep, only to wake in the dead hours of the morning, my thoughts racing. *I have to talk to Mum. She needs to know she’s dying. I need to know what she wants me to do. How can I make her final days more bearable? If I mention ‘death’ will it make her give up the fight?*

Torn by the conflict, I sought help from a grief counsellor. She gave me the courage to broach the subject of death with my mother.

To avoid any distractions when I spoke to Mum, I sought the help of her friend who visited her every day. ‘Carmen, could you take Dad out for a bit of R & R tomorrow, for both of you? I’ll look after Mum.’

When I arrived the following day, my mother was sitting in her recliner in the lounge room. It was good to see her out of bed.

‘Mum, do you want me to give you a facial and pluck your eyebrows?’

‘Just a facial, sweetheart.’

Sitting on the arm of the chair, I unscrewed the jar and gently applied the cream to her sunken cheeks. The March sunlight bathed her once beautiful face. I took a breath –

‘Mum, I need to talk to you about this bloody cancer. You’ve been fighting it for a long time and winning. But what if it wins?’

Her eyes were downcast. ‘I don’t want to talk about it... it makes me depressed.’

Before the cancer took hold, my mother had been a joyful woman – her happiness infusing everyone around her. My memories of her were dissipating. I struggled to hold onto the images of her laughing and joking as she set the festive table for family gatherings, beaming with delight as we opened our Christmas presents, and the pride she showed when I graduated from University. The new reality was not what she wanted others to see: her distress, her helplessness, her vulnerability.

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Giving my mother permission to voice her fear enabled her to confide to me that she suspected she was going to die soon. After a protracted silence, she said, ‘Don’t let me suffer.’ I gave her a lingering hug, then her former persona expressed itself: ‘Make sure I have a good ‘send-off’.’

We both laughed and then we cried.

Throughout her fifteen months of terminal illness, my mother was cared for at home. My father was ‘the director’ in the drama. Mum had run the household ‘her way’ and now he took command – she had no purpose, she was ‘the patient’. We all acted according to his dictates.

Whenever I went to see my mother, I spent time in her bedroom and began noticing she had difficulty getting into a sitting position.

‘Mum, can I help you?’

‘Yes, sweetheart. It hurts when I push on my arms.’

‘Dad, I’ve seen those remote-controlled beds. I think Mum needs one, don’t you?’

‘It’s a waste of money for such a short period of time.’ Then, he pointed his finger at the bowl of soup on her tray. ‘Jessie! How do you expect to get better if you don’t eat?’

He’d created a double-bind situation where my mother had to pretend that these two statements were compatible.

‘Mum, I’ll make you something nice to eat. Okay?’

I took the tray to the kitchen and mixed up Sustagen, poured it into a champagne glass, and surrounded it with strawberries dipped in sugar. Striding past my father, I placed the tray on the bedside table. Mum’s eyes lit up as though I’d set a banquet before her.

‘And Dad... You’re going to buy the bloody bed. My mother’s worth it.’

The theatrics continued, with visitors and family expending wasted effort to produce an elaborate deception for their audience – my mother, who didn’t want to be deceived and who already knew the finale of the drama.

Their attempts at controlling their emotions and avoiding talk of death resulted in absurd statements.

‘Jessie, when you’re better, we’ll go to the beach and eat hobz-bi-zeit.’ Mum forced a smile at this reference to the Maltese picnic favourite. When they weren’t looking, she caught my eye and I gestured with my hand, that it was okay to pretend. It was comforting for my

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mother to know that while everyone else kept up the charade that she would get better, she could turn to me to regain her grasp on reality.

During the last two weeks of her life, my mother told me she was in so much pain she *wanted* to die. I played her words over in my mind. *Is she telling me this because she wants to give me the cue to express my grief, or to soften the blow when she dies? Or does she want me to take steps to end her suffering?* I decided to confront my father and check on her pain medication.

‘Dad, why doesn’t her GP give her stronger palliative drugs?’

‘Because they would kill her.’

‘She’s fucking dying, Dad!’ *There, I’ve said it out loud.* I’d gone off-script. There was a lengthy silence before my father found his lines.

‘I don’t want to be responsible for ending her life.’

I stormed out, slamming the front door. *This farce has to end.*

After weeks of stand-off with my father, fate intervened –

Early one morning there was a phone call from my youngest brother, ‘Sis, Dr Duval is here. He’s ordered an ambulance to take Mum to a hospice.’ Michael was sobbing. ‘She doesn’t recognise me, Sis.’

I drove the thirty-kilometre distance in less than half an hour, my vision blurred by floods of tears. The ambulance officers were bundling my mother into their van as I arrived – she was unresponsive as I took her hand and looked at my father.

Dad’s face was contorted with anxiety. ‘I wanted them to take her to Caritas Christi but were no vacancies.’ The Catholic hospice wouldn’t have ‘killed’ my mother and Dad would’ve been spared the guilt.

‘Good.’ I didn’t disguise my relief.

I followed the ambulance to Peter MacCallum and waited outside the ward as the nurses made my mother comfortable. The tension in her face had gone, her breathing shallow, her eyelids translucent.

Over the next five hours, the support cast of family and friends arrived, positioning themselves around my mother’s bed. The doctor slipped in and examined her, briefly, before making notes on a flip chart that hung at the end of the bed. As he left, I followed him out.

‘Please...whatever it takes...make sure my mother doesn’t suffer any more.’

‘We’ll make her comfortable. Don’t worry.’ He rested his hand on my shoulder.

When I re-entered the room, all eyes turned towards me, searching for hope. My cousin who had caused my mother angst in the past, came up to me. ‘I’m so sorry.’

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‘No one can hurt her ever again.’ I said, staring her down.

The visitors left – mourners, now the play had ended.

I leaned over my comatose mother and held her in a final embrace. ‘Love you, Mum. You can let go now.’