

Hospice Hallways

By: Steve Schatz

Death watch is a boring business. The work is done by others, veiled behind coma and medication, with an occasional twitch or moan to break the silence. In a hospice, even beeps and pings that chart the progress toward an inevitable destination are absent. Only ragged breathing provides a soundtrack to inform that the journey is not yet done.

Time is fluid here. Both the stars and audience effortlessly wander through decades and lifetimes, bouncing from childhood to death on the turn of a thought.

In a hospice, residency is rarely a surprise, but a planned event. Travelers have booked their trip in advance and know the itinerary. The attendees who are seeing the travelers off have no surprises to fear. Outbursts of tears are few and usually brief. The well has nearly run dry. The curtain has rung up on the final act. All that remains is waiting.

The most common question to nurses and doctors is, "How long?" Attendees are not being petty. With the ending foretold, a schedule unknown even to the star, dialogue bouncing between nonexistent and hopelessly hackneyed, one wishes for, while not wanting, the end. How many times can you pray, whisper words of love, and say goodbye? "You can let go." becomes an increasingly firm mantra, moving from gently holding open the gate to fighting down the desire to kick their ass through.

I was in town for the death of my mother's partner. They had never married, but had lived together in love and fondness for nearly 17 years. He was OK in my book...not really my style, but he made Mom happy. However, he had started dying nearly 10 years earlier and was still not going gently. I was not there for him. Years ago I told my mother she could call if she needed me and I would come. She called. So, in August, in Houston, in a heat wave and humidity so thick the air needed to be chewed before inhaling, in a hospice so air conditioned I knew there was little chance of escaping without a cold, there I sat. He lay dying. His kids had come and gone, not wanting to sit around waiting for the inevitable. One went home to California. One went to a Star Trek convention in Vegas.

We drove in every day. First stop was the nurses' station to make sure he was still "in residence". Next, to the room to open the blinds – some sun to brighten the quiet. Mom would lean over his emaciated body, kiss him, and tell him he could let go. Then we sat.

After a time, the parade would start. Each visitor performed their own personal dance of blessing the body in waiting and told him he could and should let go. After, they would sit with Mom and she would begin her tape of stories – their life together, the people who had come or called over the last few days, what each had said, and the plans for the memorial service. I had been there a few days, knew the tape by heart and wasn't interested in another rerun. It was too hot and sticky to spend much time outside. So, I walked the halls.

Most of the doors were left open. The same program was playing in the other rooms – a main character moving less and less with a few on-lookers doing less and less until all were still – one lying in the bed, the others sitting and occasionally going out to the hall for some reminder of life outside the still shadows. When the final scene loomed, a larger group would appear, hanging around in the room, the cafeteria, and the corridors for the few hours or day required. When the finale came, the door to the hallway would be closed. If the room was close, you could hear the wails of the newly bereft through the wall. A few

moments later, the living would, leaning on each other, take their final leave of this place – walking down the corridor and back into their lives. The staff would quietly ask those from other plays to step into their rooms, as some privacy was required in the hallway. A gurney would arrive and the actor would efficiently be wheeled out for his curtain call in church or crematorium. Then the doors to the other rooms would be opened, and I would begin prowling again.

The old Greek lady clutched a tissue in her fist, cell phone beside her, as she sat quietly outside the room where her husband lay dying. I don't talk to people in elevators or bathrooms or airplanes. Maybe it was her lined face with deep, black pools for eyes. Maybe it was her shapeless, black dress, a button come undone, unnoticed. I smiled cursorily. She nodded briefly then glanced an invitation at the place on the bench beside her. I sat down.

“This man.” she motioned toward the room with her head. “He had something wrong in his brain- a little”..she paused, hunting for the word...”schizophrenia.” She nodded firmly, certain the word was correct. “He would be so cruel. He would say the things that...” She mimicked plunging a knife into her heart and turning it.

She talked of her years with this man and her children – one dead, two grown, but sick - one with mental disease, one with physical disease. She talked of her childhood in a small Greek village. Her English was not strong, often saying a word in Greek, searching for the English, or miming the meaning, but she was strong. She had stories to be told.

“My father would beat us. He didn't care. He just wanted our work, like animals, and our dowry. This man was not so bad. Mostly he was jealous. He would hit, but not so hard. My father, when he was dying, he asked me to forgive him, for all the things he did. I said, OK. But inside I thought. Give me another life. Then I will forgive you. If you cut off my hand and ask me to forgive, what would I say? Give me another hand. And I tell him, inside, give me back my life and then I forgive you. If not, you go to hell. But on the outside, I don't say nothing to him.”

Time had passed. She had spoken the appetizer. Now she turned on the bench, looking at me hard. She wanted to be sure I understood this next part.

“I learned to read by picking up little pieces of paper with writing on them and asking people what they meant. Then I would say that word again and again, looking at that paper, until I understood...I remembered. I did not want to be a stupid country girl. I learned to read.” She nodded again, studying me to be sure I understood the importance and difficulty of this achievement. She sighed and continued.

“When I was 19, a man came to our village. He was a teacher and he was so handsome. I loved him, even though he was 5 years older than me. In time, he asked my father for me and my father said yes and he gave me a ring.” As she spoke, that shy, yet awkward young girl looked out through those smoldering eyes. A smile played around the corners of her mouth and her wrinkles melted in this place of swirling years.

“But later he asked me how much school I had. I told him I had none and he laughed at me and took away that ring and left.” The hurt of that laugh rose into her face, stinging as if had been struck this moment, not 70 years before. She looked down and rewrapped the tissue knotted around her strong fingers. “I think he was afraid I would embarrass him when he introduced such an uneducated girl as the wife of a

teacher.” She looked up suddenly. “I tried to throw myself in the well. I did not want to live, but my girl friend, she saw and she stopped me.”

She shook her head, old again, the girl slipping back into the deep, dark waters of the years. “Later on, this man asked my father for me and again my father said yes. This man did not give back the ring. He married me. Never has he had a kind word for me. But what was I to do?” She shrugged. “He took me to America. I worked. He worked. Now...” She shrugged again.

“They say that if you stumble when you wake up, you fall all day. That was it for me. When I was 19, I opened up my wings and I was to fly and he laughed at me.”

She shook her head.

The next day, our actor’s breathing was shallow. I stepped out to call home, needing to hear the sounds from my life. Our little calico was dying. Her heart. Nothing to be done. She had come in, panting, saying goodbye, and then slowly climbed down to hide near our brook that filled the air with its music of water rushing over stone – a perfect farewell place. Paul was there to take notice and wash the moment with tears. I, who had nursed the little kitten into life years before, was not there to touch the passing of the sleek mouser she had become. I went back inside.

The door to our actor’s stage was closed. I turned to walk the hallway, but a nurse stopped me and led me in. Mom had leaned over to put some lip balm on a sore blossoming at the corner of his mouth and she realized. He was cold and still. He who held on so fiercely and fought so hard with fear and will had left, offering not even a whisper, alone with the woman who had taught and learned the labors love requires.

It took only minutes to leave. I quickly tossed the detritus of the short stay in a rolling suitcase. We each kissed the still face. There were no tears. Then it was our turn for that final walk down the corridor. Rolling the suitcase in one hand, my other arm wrapped around Mom to steady her, we started. My Greek lady was in her spot on the bench. She looked up. She saw. She stood.

“Your person?” she asked, knowing the answer.

Choking back an unexpected sob, I nodded. Walking to us, she touched my arm, then reached out and squeezed my mother’s soft fingers in the calloused and wrinkled hands of a cleaning lady...two women, both faces grown weary from holding back years of grief, toes touching opposite sides of the same threshold.

Then she stepped back and again took her place on the bench to await her call. We continued on, turned the corner, and stepped into the thick heat, blinking in the bright sunlight of an otherwise normal day.

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