

Bed of Roses

Mom dies on a Friday, the day before Valentine's Day. Less than two months after the doctor tells us the cancer has spread. She takes all day to die.

Annemarie, the hospice nurse, calls at 7am.

"Your mother is very agitated," she says.

I'm in my pajamas watching the morning news.

"Partly cloudy with a chance of snow," the weatherman tells me. Earlier, when I couldn't sleep, I'd watched a story about Dalmatians. People forget that when tragedy strikes, the rest of the world doesn't stop even though your world slows to a grinding halt.

Mom doesn't like Annemarie because she smokes on the front stoop on her breaks. Mom says she can smell the cigarettes on Annemarie's fingers when she doles out the pills or spoon feeds her the carrot ginger soup the holistic book recommends. I don't mind Annemarie, but in truth, I wish I didn't have to go. It's a long weekend because of President's Day and I'd rather stay here in my pajamas and watch *The Price is Right* or even the weather all day – the storm clouds gliding towards the East Coast, the little snowflake icons stamped all over the weather map. It would be better than watching my mother die. I feel horrible for thinking this, but it seems true.

"I'll be right there," I say into the receiver and click off the TV. As soon as I hang up the phone, I feel like I need to share this information with someone, *everyone*. Normally, I'm a stoic introvert, but I have felt this way throughout Mom's illness – the need to broadcast every new development so that it won't be just my crisis. "Breaking news," I say to myself while I get

dressed. “She’s very agitated.” I imagine one of those high school musical scenes, the kind where the townsfolk are gathered in small clusters around the stage, whispering about Trouble with a capital T. Together they chant and dance their way through dire situations, use their onstage antics to find the best course of action and forge ahead. They’re experts at grinning and bearing it. They always see the glass as half full even when it’s clearly completely empty. Real life tragedy isn’t like that. Instead, you wait. You pray. Then you listen attentively to the doctor saying the cancer has spread to the left femur, the right collarbone, the liver. You listen to your mother swear in a way she once told you was un-Christian. It’s understandable. She’s only fifty-three and has only been sick for just over a year. Wait a minute, you want to ask the doctor, when you say “the left femur,” do you mean *my* left or *her* left? As though this small bit of clarity could explain why she’s suddenly so chillingly close to the end of her life.

When I get to Mom’s, Annemarie stamps out her butt and motions me in the side door of the garage where my father is still storing his power tools even though their divorce was finalized three months ago and he hasn’t lived here since before she was diagnosed. After he left, Mom moved out of the bedroom they’d shared and into my old bedroom where she thought she’d like it better. But after some hard core chemo, the Hospice people traded out my queen sized bed for a twin hospital bed and they took away the dusty rose carpet she’d picked out for me in high school. “The carpet collects too many allergens,” they say. Mom doesn’t like it as much this way, but she’s stuck here. Now she lies on the bed and stares at the blue skies and clouds I painted on the ceiling years ago, before any of this happened.

“Blue skies, coming my way,” we sing. “Nothing but blue skies from now on.”

Both of us know this isn’t true, but we sing it anyway.

My old bedroom has become The Hospital Room. There are bottles of pills covering the bedside table, piles of bed linens on the mahogany dresser, a pink plastic bedpan on the windowseat. And Annemarie breezes in and out all day with a color coded file folder documenting the progression of the disease. This documentation seems totally unnecessary to me. If we know she's going to die, why do we need to record the deterioration in minute detail? *Unable to eat lunch, say the notes. No bowel movements today. Patient expresses little affect* Does all this really matter?

Mom now rents the master bedroom she used to share with my father to a young woman named Sangita. She's a senior at the community college and she keeps the room immaculate. She makes the queen-sized bed every day with a white Matelasse coverlet, and arranges her sweaters by color in the closet. It never looked this neat when my parents were still together, but somehow I like it better. The organization. The fact that everything has its place. It's comforting. It makes sense at a time when nothing else does.

As I step into the house through the garage, I hear Mom's moans immediately. Low guttural moans that makes me think of pipes creaking in the engine room of an ocean liner. Annemarie pulls me in by my elbow with a stern look as though she's afraid I'm a flight risk.

"I called the pharmacy," she says. "Someone needs to pick up some liquid morphine to calm her down." She explains that the closest pharmacy that carries liquid morphine is twenty minutes each way which means it'll take one hour round trip.

"I'll go," I tell her beginning to slip my jacket back on. Liquid morphine sounds like the name of a punk band, I feel like telling her, but she wouldn't get it.

Annemarie places both hands on my shoulders and looks me hard in the eyes.

“You need to stay here,” she says. Her voice has grown very quiet. “If it’s not today, it will definitely be this weekend.”

I stare at her. Why does she say “it” when she means “death”? And not just any death, but *Mom’s* death, a personal, agonizing, ugly, horrific death, something practically tangible, not some neutered word, “it”. I call Hillary to get the morphine. She’s my best friend and even though she’s terrible with directions and a bad driver to boot, she knows Mom’s comfort depends on her finding this pharmacy pronto.

“I’ll get there as soon as I can,” she says.

Waiting for Hilary to return, I sit on the living room couch and look through the viewfinder at slides my parents took of me and my siblings as children. Mom must have been looking at these recently – I haven’t seen them in years. There’s a slide of Mom feeding my brother blueberries in Maine; I can only see her hand in the photo, but I can tell it’s her by the ring on her finger. There’s another one of my sister in yellow fuzzy feetie pajamas with a patch over her eye after a surgery to correct her lazy eye. There’s one of me, age three, in patterned corduroy overalls waving at the camera. In the background, it looks like we’re having a picnic. Our dog, Schatzie, a fat-bellied dachshund grazes through unattended food. The last slide shows the three of us, my brother, my sister and me, huddled around a newly constructed snowman with a carrot nose and my father’s beige scarf around his neck. We’re bundled up in head-to-toe snowsuits that Mom made us wear in the winter. I used to hate this, but now it makes me smile.

I go through the slides three times because I don’t want to go upstairs yet. It’s like I’m a child avoiding the monster in the closet, only this monster is my mother on her deathbed which makes me feel awful for being so cowardly. The truth is, I’ve seen too much of this in the past year and I can’t take it. This seems insensitive when you think about the amount of personal pain

and suffering she's endured, but what can I say? No child wants to be the caretaker for a dying parent. The role reversal is too severe. Several months back, I'd actually felt a twinge of resentment when I contracted bronchitis and I couldn't call Mom over to tend to me, even though I'm old enough to tend to myself and probably wouldn't have called her even if she was healthy.

But it's not just the fact that she won't be around to mother me. It's that sometimes she acts like a stubborn child and I don't know what to do. She doesn't want to take her medicine; she refuses to go to the doctor; she keeps telling me how much money she's saving on the heating bill, when really, shouldn't she be more concerned about keeping warm? It feels disrespectful to challenge her even though I know I should, for her own good. But she's the one going through this first hand and there's a lot of this she can only do alone. Her own body has betrayed her. There's so much she's unable to control right now, so what do I care if she wants to keep the thermostat at fifty degrees even when the wind chill is minus ten? I can only offer her the illusion of control, but it's better than letting her feel so helpless.

At nine o'clock, Sangita's boyfriend, Howard, calls to ask whether he can bring a surprise for Sangita for Valentine's Day. I feel like I should tell him about the situation, but I hesitate with the words. How would I put it? "Oh, don't mind the moaning and groaning, Howard. Annemarie has assured me it'll all be over soon." He arrives by nine thirty with a huge heart-shaped box of chocolates and a fistful of roses. I'm apologetic on the phone with him and now apologetic again as he tries not to cringe at the sounds of Mom's pain. What am I apologizing for? This is her house, her pain, her life, her death. He's the one who should be apologizing.

But I don't say anything. And now I'm forced to climb the stairs. Still hesitant, I follow Howard up to the pristine bedroom and watch him sprinkle blood red rose petals across the clean

white bedspread. There's something oddly morbid about this, something unsettling. It reminds me of Tom Petty's video of *Mary Jane's Last Dance*, Tom dancing with a limp, corpselike Kim Basinger, moving across the floor in slow zombie-like circles. The lyrics run through my head.

Oh my my, oh hell yes

You've got to put on that party dress

It strikes me now that not only is Mom banished from her former bedroom where she and my father once spent happier times, but this young couple is celebrating their love for each other in that former bedroom while she's dying in the other room. The irony would almost be comical if it wasn't so sad. It feels like one of those moments in which life is trying to tell you something: *Relish your precious moments. Be grateful for what you have. Tell your loved ones how much they mean to you before it's too late.* I imagine this scene on the front of a Hallmark card. It would be a drawing of a dollhouse cut open diorama style so that you could see everything: Annemarie in the kitchen grating carrots; the young couple in full embrace in the master bedroom; Mom staring at the ceiling in The Hospital Room. I spend several seconds trying to imagine myself in this scene and that's when I finally decided to face Mom.

I tiptoe down the hall and stand in the doorway, watching her from a distance. Her eyes are clenched tight and she thrashes from side to side. With her hair still short, she looks ultra-chic, her nose and cheekbones chiseled like those of a department mannequin. When she was younger, she was so beautiful. She still is, but in a different way. The disease has brought both beauty and ugliness to her face in a way that's hard to explain. Gazing at her from the doorway, I can recognize pieces of myself in her features, and it brings tears to my eyes. Is this because I am suddenly aware of my own mortality or because I'd rather she stayed in this world than have her legacy reflected in me? She opens her eyes when I sit on the edge of the bed. I rub her

forehead and squeeze her hand. Looking out the windows, I see that the snow has started to fall. The flakes stick to the windowpanes, reminding me of the icons on the weather map earlier this morning.

“Partly cloudy with a chance of snow,” I tell her. She nods and gives me a half smile, the best she can do right now and suddenly I love her so much for it. I’m so glad I’m here watching her die instead of watching the weather report or *The Price is Right*. What was I even thinking earlier? This is where I need to be.

By eleven, Hilary finally arrives and we watch Annemarie administer the liquid morphine orally via syringe. Within minutes Mom is much calmer and we have more waiting to do. What do you do all day while your mother is waiting to die? Time slows down and speeds up simultaneously. By one o’clock, my sister arrives and we organize the spice cabinet. By three o’clock, my aunt and uncle from Atlanta bringing maple sugar pecans and a canned ham. By five o’clock, my brother finally gets there from New Hampshire. By seven o’clock, my father arrives and takes charge. Friday used to be pizza night so he orders pizza of old times sake.

We take turns sitting with Mom and holding her hand. When it’s my turn, I lie in the hospital bed next to her and do my best to talk her through this. She tries to answer, but her words are slurred. Still, I can understand her with such clarity it brings tears to my eyes.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, “don’t be afraid. We’re all here with you. We won’t let you do this alone.”

I fluff up her pillows and tuck her in tight, try to make her as comfortable possible. I kiss her cheek and tap one finger on her nose the way she used to when I was little. That doesn’t seem so long ago.

By nine pm, we are all in the room huddled around her. This has taken all day and there is a strange sense of calm even though none of us know what to expect. But we're OK with that now. We wouldn't want this to be predictable. At some point, I creep away into Sangita's room and stand in front of the closet. I snatch one of the sweaters from its color-sorted pile and shove it in with a different grouping. Then I do it again. And again. And again. I slip back into Mom's room with a smile on my face. She would have loved that. By the time I return, it's obvious the end is near. Another Hospice nurse has arrived from somewhere and Mom is sipping at the air so slowly it's like she's in slow motion. And then before I can think about what is going to happen next, Annemarie has her fingers on Mom's wrist checking for a pulse. She and the other nurse count aloud up to sixty. There are no breaths. Mom is very very still and what little red was left in her cheeks has seeped away. Where did it go? I wonder. Annemarie turns to us and nods.

"That's it," she says. "She's gone."

And then it all speeds up again. My tears are there so quickly that I make no effort to wipe them away. I cry into my father's flannel shirt and squeeze my brother's hand. And in the middle of all this, Sangita gets home. We can hear her heels making their way up the staircase and we hear her squeal in delight when she reaches her room and spots all the surprises Howard has planted for her. No one in the Hospital Room says anything. What is there to say? We can each have our separate moments. We listen to Sangita punch numbers into the phone and coo sweet nothings. "Oh, Howard," she says. "What would I do without you?"

At the florist the next day, ordering funeral flowers, it takes me a minute to realize that it's Valentine's Day and this is the last minute rush. The place is swarming with people, mostly men, buying dozens of roses for their sweethearts. There are bouquets of roses everywhere – all

different colors, all different types. Silver sterling roses with baby's breath; wine red roses in matching vases; miniature pink roses in silver cups. The phone rings incessantly and the staff are hustling all over the place, navigating through the hubbub of all these people who want to tell their loved ones how they feel. Or some version of that. I close my eyes and hope real hard that Mom heard what I had to tell her.

When I get home, someone has swept away all of Annemarie's butts from out front. Sangita is gone and so are all the rose petals. But the viewfinder is still on the coffee table downstairs. I sit on the couch for one last shuffle, laughing and crying at the same time until I reach the last slide, and start all over again.