**Leaving the Body – “Leaving” Contest Winner**

**http://hospitaldrive.org/2018/11/leaving-the-body-contest-winner/**

*From our contest judge: I read “Leaving the Body” at least five times and wept each time. It’s about the narrator’s mother’s body being washed just after death. The daughter opts to stay in the room while the body is being cleaned, and during that brief episode comes to terms with what she has lost. The writing is unsentimental and haunting. It is, without doubt, a most deeply moving and memorable piece.*

**Leaving the Body**

by Lisa Knopp

A woman enters the room and sits a basin of water on the bedside table. “I’m here to get your mother ready for the people who are coming to pick her up soon,” she says softly. My brothers and sister-in-law excuse themselves and head to the family lounge. I linger.

“Can I stay?” I ask.

“Of course,” the woman says. She wears a pink uniform and has long, straight dark hair. Perhaps she’s a nurse’s aide, since she wasn’t one of the women who brought morphine in response to my repeated runs to the nurse’s station in the several hours before my mother’s heart stopped beating. She dips a cloth in the water and wrings it out. I wonder the point of bathing my mother, since her body will be soon be ash.

“I just want you to know,” the aide says, “I always talk to the person I’m washing. I don’t want you to be alarmed.” Then she turns to my mother, whose heart stopped beating less than an hour ago. “I’m going to give you a bath, Patricia. I’m going to start with your face.”

I find this comforting, this informing my mother of what’s about to be done to her, since I can feel that something of her is still here.

The aide wipes my mother’s forehead and cheeks, her eyes, the corners of her mouth. “Now I’m going to wash your hands and arms, Patricia,” she says, as she works the wash cloth over each arthritic finger on my mother’s left hand.

When I was a child, my mother believed it would make me sicker if I took a full bath or got my hair wet when I was feverish. Instead, she’d wipe me with a warm washcloth. A “sponge bath” she called it. It wasn’t as good as a real bath, but I liked the attention. I wish that I or someone else had thought to do this for her before her heart stopped beating.

When I look up, I see that another aide, this one in a light turquoise uniform, has entered the room. She watches as the aide in pink removes the IV needle taped to my mother’s right forearm. My mother hasn’t received anything through this needle since she entered the hospice facility three-and-a-half days earlier. I wonder why it wasn’t removed until now.

“I’m going to take off your gown, Patricia,” she says. She unties the johnny gown, and the two women slip it off. The pink aide carefully pulls the catheter.

It has been so long since I’ve seen my mother’s naked body, and I’m filled with wonder. Even though she would feel shamed by my scrutiny, I want to savor and memorize the details. Her nipples are a lovely light pink and pegged; a puckery white surgical scar on her left outer breast is smaller than I expect it to be and matches one that I have on my right breast. A dark pink surgical scar follows the lower edge of her right rib cage; her belly is swollen as if she were pregnant and the skin taut and yellowish. Her vulva is bald but for sparse reddish hairs. Her once stout legs are thin, the skin loose and wrinkled. I know their shape so well: large knee bones, slightly bowing calves, like those of her mother, and thick ankles. Just below her right knee on her inner calf is a blue vein, an inch or two long that has been there as long as I can remember.

Her feet are puffy and mottled. The little toe on her right foot is flattened atop her fourth toe. Something was wrong with that toe or foot when she was a baby, though I can’t remember what; nor can I ask her about it now. The doctor taped it wrong, and the toe bone insisted on holding that position after the tape was removed. Before buying a pair of sandals, my mother had to test the placement of the straps in relation to her “bad” toe. Though the fourth toe on my right foot looks normal, it is also bad, perhaps broken without my knowing it and never healed right. To accommodate my bad toe, I buy my walking shoes a half size larger than my other shoes. As I gaze upon my mother’s scarred and shriveled body, I wonder if this is how I’ll look in another twenty-one years.

I used to be almost as familiar with my mother’s body as my own. When she was pregnant with her youngest child, an August baby, she’d walk around our unairconditioned house in just her underwear, her belly hard and enormous and scored by red stretch marks. I was old enough to be embarrassed by her near nudity.

I remember her sunbathing in the backyard in a two-piece swimsuit. If she was on her stomach, I could see the light freckling that appeared when she tanned or burned, the big flesh-colored mole just above her bra strap, her slender waist, the silvery-white stretch marks on her wide, fleshy hips. If she was on her back, I could see her breasts fallen to the sides (they were so much larger than mine ever would be, even when swollen with milk), the blue vein beneath her knee, her thick ankles, and her bad toe. Until I left home, we used to brush each other’s hair and give each other “back scratchin’s.” “Get it really good around my mole,” she’d say.

Aging turned my mother’s body into something that was foreign and yet familiar in a way that unsettles me. When I visited her three months prior to her death, I glimpsed her in her bedroom, pulling on her jeans. Because I didn’t want to embarrass her by letting her know that I’d seen the slack, wizened, and folded flesh on her buttocks and thighs, I quickly dropped my gaze. But she had seen. “It’s okay,” she said. “You can come in.”

Then, she asked if I wanted to see her incision, cut so a surgeon could lift from her body her tumor- and stone-filled gallbladder and the excruciating pain it had caused her the past few months. But he left behind the cancer that had spread throughout her peritoneum. “No point in removing it,” he said. “This cancer is too aggressive.” My mother laid on her bed and pulled up her sweater. I placed my hands just below the cut on her soft belly and prayed for healing. I prayed so long and so deeply that, finally, she interrupted me. “Are you all right?”

Now, less than an hour after my mother’s heart stopped beating and a little more than an hour before the couple from the funeral home will arrive, I find myself starving for her physicality.

“I want to touch her,” I say to the pink aide. I don’t want to alarm her by doing so without first announcing my intention.

“Of course,” she says. “Go ahead.”

If I were alone with my mother, I would run my hands up and down her arms, kiss each palm, taste each palm, touch the scars on both knees, try to rub warmth into each cold foot, and press my hands flat in the hollow between her breasts where her heart once beat. Instead, I lay my hands on her hard, warm belly and the big “tumor load,” as the hospice doctor called it. I kiss her clean forehead and stroke the top of her head.

What is it that I’ll be missing now that my mother’s heart has stopped beating, and she’ll soon be turned to ash? For most of my adult life, she and I have been separated by demanding schedules, too many miles, and costly plane tickets. Until this past year when I visited her several times, we usually saw each other twice a year, with me staying with her for a week or so in the summer at her log home in the woods of north-central Ohio and her staying with me at my home in Lincoln, Nebraska for several days in the fall or at Thanksgiving or Christmas when my son and daughter were also there.

Yet, I always imagined that one day she and I would live near enough that we could meet regularly for lunch or a concert or play, shopping in thrift stores or at farmer’s markets, and visiting each other in our homes. What I regret the most is that we didn’t spend more time in each other’s physical presence. This sponge bath is my last chance to see and touch and smell my mother, flesh of my flesh, my first home.

Since my father’s death almost ten years ago, I was present to my mother almost every morning when we’d talk by telephone for half an hour, though often longer, while I walked in my neighborhood or on the bike path. If one of us wasn’t available then, I’d call in the late afternoon or early evening.

We’d talk about the weather (“Tell me about your weather, because whatever you got is coming our way.”), politics (“I just wish that Hillary was more electable, because I’d sure like to see her and Bill back in the White House.”), British series on PBS with *Call the Midwife, Doc Martin,*and*Foyle’s War* being our mutual favorites (“They must have an awfully small pool of actors over there in England, because you keep seeing the same ones in different series.”), her longtime beau (“Can’t live with him, can’t live without him,” she’d often say), aging (“Sometimes I look in the mirror and go to pieces.”), my kids (“What’s going on in Meredith’s world?” “Is it safe to ask how Ian’s doing?”), her friends (“Mary Jane and I had so much fun getting lost yesterday!”), her memories (“Grandma Whitaker said I was born with a caul over my face. She said she wore it in a locket around her neck for good luck, though I never saw it.”), and the afterlife (“Is it wrong to want there to be nothing after death?”).

But we rarely talked about her cancer. What I wanted to know was what it was like to watch and feel one’s body shutting down as one’s end approached. What I wanted to know about were her regrets and gratitudes, her doubts and certainties, and all of those details she held about my life and hers that I never knew or only knew pieces of or had forgotten—details that no one else can tell me. Instead, we talked about the little facts of her illness: her sleep, appetite, nausea, and defecation. The daily “s.a.n.d.” report, I called it. I was frustrated, but my mother said that if she wasn’t thinking or talking directly about the big facts of her illness, she could forget about it and feel “normal” for a bit.

For the most part, what has been taken from me, now that my mother’s heart has stopped beating and her body will soon be turned to ash, isn’t her body, since over the past several decades, that was so seldom part of my experience of her, but her disembodied voice, words, thoughts, laughter, and silences transmitted across 850 miles by radio waves.

Several times a day over the next several months after my mother’s heart stopped beating, I’ll feel the urge to call or text her and tell her about this weirdly warm February and highly allergenic March, the unexpected death of a Supreme Court judge, the article in our hometown newspaper about the volunteer work of one of her former teaching colleagues, the sad and daunting task of sorting through her possessions (“If I only have room for one more item on the truck, should I take your sewing rocker or the corner what-not shelf that Dad built?”), and how less urgent and consuming my prayers are now that she’s gone. I’ll want to tell her that I feel gut-sick when I see how quickly her name is moving down the list of frequently called numbers on my cell phone.

I’ll want to tell her that I now hold so many poignant memories that will forever define my experience of the seasons. For instance, when returning from several of my daily rambles last August and September, I stopped in a neighbor’s yard to pick ripe pears with one hand while holding my cell phone in the other as my mother and I talked about her pain level at that moment, about what the surgeon might find, did find, and how Dad lived with cancer almost ten years instead of the three that the oncologist predicted. Or fall, her favorite season. The ten days we spent together in mid-October were so beautiful, in part, because our faith in the chemotherapy was newly borne and fervent. Or early winter. During my visit the first week of January, I watched her precipitous decline; later that month, I witnessed the swift approach of her savage death.

Every morning after my mother’s heart stopped beating, I’ll think about all that I would ask her if only she’d answer her phone—like what should I do with the pears? The first time I saw the clear bags of sliced pears stacked in my freezer after her heart stopped beating, I cried. Now, I can’t eat them; nor can I throw them out. I’ll want to assure her that in spite of the pain, I don’t want this grief that mingles with my joy at the arrival of the mourning doves and daffodils she loved, and I don’t want the buds on the pear trees to end because it keeps her near and present.

The two aides turn my mother onto her belly and wash her back. I see the big mole, the slack, silvery stretch marks on the sides of her torso, the brown splotch on her bony butt—the beginning of a bedsore, the turquoise aide says. “Already?” I ask.

My mother’s cancer spread with what the hospice doctor called “reckless abandon.” “If I had to have a cancer,” he said, “this isn’t the one I’d pick.”

She had gone from living alone in her own home to two nights in the hospital and three-and-a-half days in hospice before her heart stopped beating. When I’d visited her two-and-a-half weeks earlier, she’d been thin, weak, and exhausted, but we’d shopped, gone to church, consulted with an attorney about her financial affairs, exchanged sharp words over what she later called “a tempest in a teapot,” and met her boyfriend for lunch (she’d eaten shrimp and coconut cream pie, two of her favorites, and laughed as he teased her).

One of the first things she said to me when I arrived at her bedside in hospice after the red eye flights that I’d purchased that same day for my son and me was, “I’d thought I’d have more time.” The second thing she said was, “I’m so sorry to put you through this.”

I had thought that she’d die the following fall, as her oncologist had predicted, rather than in January. So certain was I that we would “have more time,” that for the spring and fall semesters, I shifted my classes at the university from the traditional face-to-face format to a hybrid or blended one, alternating equally between classroom and online meetings. I figured that this more flexible combination would allow me to spend generous stretches of time with my mother at her home and eventually, to care for her in my home when her end was near.

Soon, I’d regret having moved half of my class meetings out of the classroom and interacting with my students as disembodied posts on Blackboard. There we can’t make eye contact, read each other’s facial expressions and body language in light of the context, as consoling or unnerving as that can be, hear each other’s laughter, participate in a communal silence, or notice a new haircut or tattoo. Even so, the dean of my college is awarding bonuses to faculty who redesign their courses so that there’s more screen time and less or no face or body time.

And too, I regret that so many of my interactions with friends, both near and far, are done via Facebook, as if a photograph, a brief comment, or a “like” from my hundreds of cyber friends, many of whom I’ve never met in person, could ever fill my heart. I miss seeing children playing outside in my neighborhood and am sad and worried that instead of learning how to get along with and enjoy real people, they’re in their homes, sitting alone before lit screens, true and unquestioning believers in the illusion of connectivity they’re offered there.

Even though I can access almost all of the public library holdings online, I pop in at my branch library at least once a week. As I browse through the books and DVDs, I chat with the librarians, security guards, and volunteers shelving books, watch preschoolers flip through books or play with blocks and puzzles, and try to ignore the intrusions made by people and their phones. On a recent library trip, I saw two little boys slouched in arm chairs near the children’s section, surrounded by bright and enticing book, magazine, and audio-visual displays. Each held a ticket reserving a computer; each looked bored and dejected. “We’ll have fun as soon as we can get on a computer, right?” one said to the other.

The women finish washing my mother. They tuck a clean sheet around all but her face. The transformation is almost complete.

The day before my mother’s heart stopped beating, I asked her if she wanted me to comb her hair. “God, yes,” she said in a lucid moment. But she was in such pain that I was afraid to move her. I combed what was free but left the snarled mess beneath her head. I dig in my mother’s purse until I find her comb and two hair bands. While the pink aide holds my mother’s head up, I scoop the tangled hair out from beneath. “I’m going to comb this out, Mom, and give you the best, most even, tightest braid you’ve ever had. I’ll be gentle.” I ask the turquoise aide if I can have a pair of scissors and a big envelope. Carefully, I work the comb through the knots.

When I was growing up, my mother wore her thick, curly red hair short with a little height on top, feathery bangs, and shorter, face-framing hairs. But when she was in her late fifties, she stopped cutting it in the back. Her mullet, we called it. She’d email photos to me of her braid so that I could see how long it was getting. When I was in Paris during the last summer of her life, I found a barrette at the gift shop at the Musee Marmottan Monet bearing a tawny and soft blue detail from a Monet painting of two women carrying parasols. Mom loved the Impressionists, and she loved pretty things for her hair, so I bought it and sent it to her. When I was at her house later on the day that her heart stopped beating and was filling her suitcase with mementos to take home with me, I found the barrette not in the bathroom drawer crammed full of her other hair accessories but in a dainty, black-and-white cloth drawstring bag on the vanity. I put it in the suitcase.

Mom had been relieved when her doctor told her that she wouldn’t go bald from chemotherapy. But she said that her hair had grown thinner because of what she preferred to call “my treatment.” Twice, I clean hairs from the comb and throw them away.  As I comb, I splay her long red-gray hair on the pillow. “It’s so pretty, Mom.” I regret that I never told her this before, though I often commented on how long her hair was and how remarkable it was that it was still reddish, even at seventy, even at eighty.

I pull her hairs together, divide them into three parts, and plait, tightly, evenly, and bind the braid at both ends with the bands. I position the scissors just above the top band, close to her head. The scissors gulp and chew. This feels like a desecration until I remember that her hair will be the first part of her to become ash when she is cremated. Though her hair is thin, I’m surprised at how many bites of it I must take with the scissors. Suddenly, the braid and a triangular chunk of hair from the left side of her head are light and free in my hand. This rope of my mother’s DNA is my relic, memento, remnant, heirloom. I slide the braid into the envelope and tuck what’s left of her hair behind her head.

I will frame the braid and hang it…where? In my living room for all to see? In a part of my house where only I go? I will pick a frame that opens easily, so I can touch and smell the braid whenever I need to. Or will I just keep it in the envelope? I hope that she is pleased that I want more than just memories of her body.

My mother is clean, shorn, and tucked in, her body out of sight. The aides leave the room. I am sad that our work is done. I kiss her forehead.

I fetch my brothers and sister-in-law. Once we’re back in the room, we eat the snacks that the chaplain brought us the day before and tell stories about our childhoods that make us laugh, as we wait for the couple from the funeral home to load and strap my mother’s corpse onto a gurney and take it away.

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