

Going Home

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(First line was provided by the NPR 3-minute story contest)

She closed the book, placed it on the table, and finally, decided to walk through the door. Her father was dead. Her mother was smoking another cigarette. There wasn't anything more for her to do, except wait. Wait for the Hospice case manager to arrive, wait for Trident Society to claim his body, wait for the medical equipment company to remove the hospital bed.

"Good book?" her mother asked.

"Yes," her daughter replied. "I'm going outside, get some fresh air."

"Okay, honey, but don't go far."

"I'll just be out on the deck."

She walked through the French doors and looked down into the canyon. She was thankful that on the day of her father's death she could close her eyes, lift her face to the sky, and feel the sun penetrate her skin, thankful that Ann Patchett had taken her to the Amazon and reminded her of states of wonder.

Now all she could think about is that death is a state of wonder.

She'd never been with someone at the moment of death, the final loss of breath, the stopping of the heart. For 52 days she had slept on the couch next to his bed, caring for his every need. Feeding him, bathing him, assisting him with the urinal, changing his diapers, massaging lotion into his dry skin, shaving his beard, administering his medication, moving him every hour to keep the bedsores away——comforting him as best she could.

"Your father is going to hang on until Christmas," her friend told her. "One last Christmas with his family."

One last Christmas dinner.

"Steak," he said. So her mother ordered the prime rib dinner from Raley's.

As she prepared his plate, she wondered if this might be his last meal: prime rib, mashed potatoes and gravy, stuffing, green beans, pumpkin pie. She didn't even know

if he was capable of eating it, but he managed every bite, asking her to heat up the different foods along the way.

She learned of his liver cancer diagnosis on his 79th birthday, 172 days before he died.

“I’ve lived twelve more years than I thought I would,” he said.

Twelve years ago. Her 41st birthday. The day of his quadruple bypass. Losing her father, even seeing him after surgery--more machine than man--never crossed her mind; the surgeon was so reassuring. This time there would be no surgeon, no cure, just the journey to death.

On Christmas, after everyone left, groaning in pain, he told her he wanted to die. “How do I do it?”

She stroked his head, held his hand, “I don’t know Dad.” Then she thought for a moment, “You can stop eating.” Except for a tangerine popsicle and sips of water, he stopped.

She had been thinking a lot about journeys the night before her father died. All great literature is about journeys, the journey to adulthood, the journey of the hero, the journey home.

His breathing had become labored, noisy. She wondered if it was the death rattle she’d heard people talk about. The smell of him had changed, offensive, sour. She thought if she swabbed his mouth it would help. But that wasn’t the help he needed.

She kissed his head, then whispered: “Dad, it’s time to go home.”

A month later, on a trip to Pacific Grove to sprinkle a handful of her father’s ashes in the place he loved so much, her friend played her the song “Going Home” by Leonard Cohen. Tears embracing her face, she turned to her beloved, beautiful friend, “that’s what I said to my father the night of the morning he died.”

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