

# No Shortcuts

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These are some things that happen after both of your parents are diagnosed with stage four cancer: they fall down stairs, they refuse wheelchairs, they reminisce, they nap a great deal. For your part, you begin to imagine your father's death—he is the sicker of your two parents—arriving via text message. *Dad died* will appear on your phone and you will crumple in the adult diapers section of Costco. You don't want your dad to die and you think that by writing the scene he won't. He loves shortcuts and would appreciate this one: *write about it and it won't happen*. You are writing. You have your own cancer to deal with.

An hour ago, your mother called your sister asking for help, which means something has gone terribly wrong. During the night, your father fell down the stairs. Now it's after noon, but your mother has only now called your sister. Mom needs help taking Dad to the emergency room. Your parents would never call an ambulance because they wouldn't want to pay the bill and, who can blame them? Also, by not calling, the problem might go away. A shortcut.

*However, comma.* This is one of your dad's favorite phrases.

The night you think your dad is dying, you start baking. You've already cleaned the apartment. You innocently turn on Spotify and find a mellow playlist. It's all love songs. You note how when someone close to you is dying, love songs sound a lot different, like they are meant for you and your dying loved one, in this case, your dad. *Should I tear my heart out now? Everything returns to you somehow.* And you think how your father, unlike most of the fathers of your friends, didn't beat you or drink himself to death or otherwise abuse you. You know the father-bar is set low in this part of the world and yet your father was above the bar and you feel lucky. Very lucky.

It occurs to you now that the last time you saw him, days ago, he stood alone on the front walk waving

goodbye serenely, as if he were giving you a gift, his last, as if he were saying, *This is how I want you to remember the last time you saw me.*

Your sisters are drinking and you are baking. Then you start writing while the cake is cooking. Narrating helps somehow but you aren't sure exactly how since you are blubbing as you type. But it's your habit to write, so you keep going. *Write about it and it won't happen.*

It's dusk, March. The robins are calling outside, *cheerily, cheerily*, but the lyrics are taunting: *I am gonna make it through this year if it kills me.* You wonder if you will make it through this year. Maybe your own cancer will come back from the stress of this shitstorm and it will kill you. You have been sick for three and a half years with a debilitating illness that no one has ever heard of. Then you got a cancer you hadn't heard of. Then your parents got cancer. It has indeed been quite a year, or rather, a number of years.

Time is meaningless when someone is dying. You make tea and realize it's late afternoon. It's raining. You've been texting with your sisters for hours. You talked with your mom on the phone, upbeat as ever, all is well, not to worry despite all evidence to the contrary, and now the day is over.

Walking on the tarmac out to the plane you remember two summers ago when you went to Mexico and how difficult it was to travel when you were sick. This morning the air is humid and cool, but at least not raining. Portland. You are in Portland. Oregon. Flying to Sacramento. You are no longer sick with your stupid illness no one has ever heard of. The chemo killed it or at least kicked it into some sort of remission. You have passed your first cancer checkup with no evidence of disease. That's what they call it, *no evidence of disease*. No evidence. You ponder that phrase in particular late at night when you can't sleep. No evidence of disease.

Evidence, none. Not there, but was there. Was there, but not there now. You remember you are getting on this plane to visit your parents who are dying. It is your parents who are sick with cancer now.

Weeks pass. Your dad is in and out of consciousness and your mother relives each day like the previous one, groundhog day, rinse, repeat. Her regrets. Her family grievances. Your absent brother. Weepy anxiety about your father and the feeding tube. A month ago the doctor was doubtful about whether or not your father could survive the insertion of a feeding tube and now your mother is insisting, "If he could just eat, he would get better." Your father agrees in whispers because the tumors have pressed his vocal chords into silence. He wants to start working on the house again.

You say over the phone during a family meeting, *Dad has cancer and he is going to die at the end of this. He is not going to get better.* For days afterward you feel awful for speaking the truth and don't call them. When you do, you talk about yourself and how much better you are doing. You try to sound cheerful. For them. For them who are dying. So they won't worry. So you don't have to feel bad about having said *Dad is going to die.*

You ask your best friend to step outside your parents' house so you can talk about your radiated vagina. After your father fell down the stairs, your sisters moved your parents permanently into your middle sister's house. Your parents won't be coming back to this house, ever, so you and your friend are cleaning it.

Standing on the front walk, you start by drawing pictures in the air with your hands and fingers, and keep your voice low because neighbors.

"You know how you can circle your cervix with your fingertip?" you ask. She nods, crow's feet straining, clearly dreading where this is going. Years ago she was the first person to tell you about feeling your cervix and why you might want to.

"Well, I can't do that anymore." You slide your finger back inside your fist, demonstrating. "It's merged. From the radiation." You wiggle your grasping thumb and index finger. "It's called 'tethering.' It's fused together here." *Wiggle-wiggle.* "And that is preventing me from having sex completely because my cervix can't move

back and away like normal during sex."

Her face drains, ashen. She already knows about the so-called "dilators," hard plastic dildos for stretching the scar tissue. *However, comma.* You soldier on, "The doctor gave me a topical hormone to use in there to keep the tissues moist and I have to increase the dilator fucking to every day."

"Every day?" She cringes, and you are so grateful she gets it. She gets that every day is unbelievable, unfair. Every day is trauma on trauma, its own kind of loss.

"Every day," you repeat. Your friend has known you since you were thirteen years old. She knows that you and your vagina have suffered enough anguish for a lifetime.

"And if you don't?"

"I won't be able to have sex again, like now."

Later you will ponder the words *never* and *ever*. Your parents are never coming back to this house, ever. For your vagina, there's still hope.

You and your friend return inside and continue where you left off with the mop and the vacuum cleaner.

Days before your father dies he is delusional and at times, incoherent. He is restless and sits on the side of the bed in your sister's guest room all night long in nothing but his diaper. One of his delusions requires him to screw a small plastic bottle onto his big toe. It is deep in the night and you are sitting with him because he fell again a few nights ago trying to get to the portable toilet in the corner of the room that the hospice nurse brought. Your father has bandages on his shoulders and scratches down his arms from the fall. Now you and your sisters, your best friend, your husband, and your brother-in-law are taking turns sitting with him during the night in hour-and-a-half shifts.

"Dad," you say, trying to take the plastic bottle away. "You're having another delusion, remember?" This worked the previous night and you both had a good laugh about it in the morning. He remembered that he was sick and that the morphine was making him crazy. But tonight, not so lucky.

"Melanie, take this and put it outside in a warm bucket."

"Okay, Dad." You take the plastic bottle of something-or-other—is it eyeglass wash or your mother's

homemade linen spray?—out into the hall and make a show of shutting the door so he thinks you're really gone for a minute. You return to the room and sit next to him on the edge of the bed.

"Did you do it?"

"Yes, Dad. I put it in a bucket of warm water like you said."

"Show me." Suddenly he is standing and pushing past you toward the door. He hasn't been able to stand by himself and now he is strong, much stronger than you realized.

"No, Dad. You're having one of your delusions. You can't go out. You'll fall like last time." This is not delivered in a light tone as if you are talking to a child, how most people speak to the old, sick, and dying. No. You're strong, firm.

"Melanie, I'm going to slap you if you don't let me see the bucket." He repeats *I'm going to slap you* while pushing against you until you are crying and yelling for your brother-in-law. For some reason your father listens to him. Maybe because he is a big guy, your ailing dad's alpha-male.

Later you will think how strange and frightening it was that your father threatened to slap you. He was never like that—you almost wrote *in real life* and realize that this is real life and he is still alive. After this incident, you all agree his morphine needs to be on a schedule, not just when he seems to need it.

In the morning you hug your father. He is lying on the bed and you awkwardly reach for one another.

"Do you remember last night, Dad? You said you were going to slap me." You try to make light of it, act shocked. He smiles.

"Don't worry about it," he whispers. This is another of his favorite phrases. *Don't worry about it.*

You say, "I won't."

Four days later he dies. A Saturday.

Seven weeks have passed and your mother becomes even more ill, so ill that she says she wants to stop her Keytruda immunotherapy infusions. "I'm done fighting," she says. That was Thursday.

On Saturday you and your sisters are with her, holding her hands in the same bed, the same room, that your father died in. The noon light is the same, and the

goldfinches in the sunflowers outside the window are the same. But unlike your father, your mother is crying out for "Mama," as she has been for the last twenty-four hours despite full doses of morphine. Her final hour is traumatic for all of you. Her final rattling, gasping breaths even worse. What is beyond traumatic? What is beyond bearable? Beyond description, narration?

In the days following your mother's death, you put things in odd places. A week passes and your husband finds a cooked sweet potato in a covered dish in a kitchen drawer. You are grateful you have slept and fed yourself. You schedule a mammogram for your left breast that has been swollen and painful for weeks.

You ask yourself, when is all of this going to end? Is it going to end? Or is the end that you, too, have a recurring, incurable cancer and that is how it will end? Or do you still have a future, something beyond the grief and loss of these number of years?

Almost a year has passed since your parents died. *However, comma*, you are at the airport again. Now because of your father-in-law's congestive heart failure and a final surgery, with final words.

As you are walking through the concourse, a thickly gray-bearded man plays a guitar, the airport's entertainment. Walking along, minding your own business, you realize the man is playing "Freight Train," the song your father played almost every day of your childhood after dinner on the banjo. *When I die, oh bury me deep.* You nearly buckle in the middle of the concourse and hightail it to a restroom to sob in a stall. You know by now that this is how grief works, in odd, blindsiding moments without warning. Though your father loved shortcuts, with grief, there aren't any. This is what you have learned. That, and that the losses keep coming. There is no higher truth. You simply must keep going.

You rinse your face and barrel through the concourse to the gate where a plane is waiting.