

In Between

We meet in Dad's hospital room. He is supine, one foot dangling from the side of the bed under a twisted blue bedsheet. The doctor's words are measured.

As you know, your father hasn't made the kind of progress we had all hoped for.

Dad's hands shake as he stares quietly at the ceiling. An umpteenth fall shattered his hip during the height of the pandemic. When I was finally permitted to visit it had been sixty-eight days since I'd seen him — this, following a suffocating year of care-home lockdowns. While a series of falls landed him here, an inexorable loneliness was the root of his decline.

He isn't able to get out of bed or stand unassisted.

I knew things were dire when I watched them use the Hoyer to lift him out of bed. I held my breath as he hung there in only a diaper — eyes wide, long limbs translucent and mottled — my once Goliath-like father now defenceless, like a baby giraffe.

He has lost interest in food.

I've been spoon-feeding him tiny amounts of pudding and thickened juice. The last time he attempted anything solid was a couple of days ago when a small piece of un-chewed beef sat in the trench of his mouth for some time before I scooped it back out with my fingers.

His veins are collapsing.

Now they are forced to move the port delivering fluids back and fourth between his thin, battered arms. I look over at them neatly tucked on either side of him, IV in the right — his lifeline.

We are wondering how you would feel about removing all life-extending care?

And there it is. The question whose answer has the power to carry Dad out of this in between place. Even before his fall his days were spent inhabiting the space between what was, and what comes next. Locked in a groundhog day loop he'd shuffle from walker to wheelchair, bed to chair, cycling through insipid meals and twice-daily medications. Some days, I'd find him sitting in his brown recliner in the middle of his one-room residence, face wet with tears, Kleenex littered around his slippered feet. He wasn't mobile. He couldn't see to read. He would forget how to turn on the television. Stuck in a bubble alongside rows of others, Dad was never fully alone, yet never really part of something either.

Then, Covid struck and we found ourselves in a collective liminality. Like Dad, our worlds had shrunk, our sense of certainty was shaken. And, like Dad, we were suspended in time, hanging between the familiar and the unknown.

I sit quietly as the nurse removes Dad's IV, then calls for a colleague to shift him back up in bed.

"He's so tall," the two women chirp as they turn and tug with such strength and skill. "We'll be

sure to keep him comfortable,” the tall, lanky one says, kind eyes shining. Dad’s room darkens and my gaze shifts to his window. Marbled grey clouds have filled the sky. It will rain tonight.

I spend the next three days by my father’s side. He rallies briefly, magically, on his eighty-seventh birthday and we celebrate him with rounds of *Take Me Out To The Ball Game* and ice-cream from tiny styrofoam cups. “I’m so happy,” he tells us.

Early on the fourth day, a Sunday, the charge nurse calls. “If there are family members who want to see your Dad, they should come today.” I wrap my hands around my steaming coffee mug and stare out the large bay window. Spring has arrived and the morning sun is melting remaining patches of snow.

I drive the half hour to the hospital. Its parking lot is barren, Covid protocols prohibiting most visitors. I take an elevator to the second floor and walk the long, empty corridor to Dad’s room. I find him, agitated, pulling at his bedcovers repeatedly with his thumb and forefinger. He’s scared. I’m afraid that if he dies today, it won’t be peaceful. I sit with him, talk to him. He can no longer respond. At one point, he reaches out and pulls me close. He’s trying to tell me something. Maybe he’s saying he knows I did my best. I hope that’s what he’s saying.

I inch my chair closer and place my hands on his. I have more I want to say. I want to tell him not to be afraid, that I'm sorry this last year was so hard, that I'm glad he was my Dad — but I don't. Others have arrived now and our time alone has passed. So, I think it. As the room gently fills with music, I think all of the things I want to say to my dad and hope he can hear me.

After a time, I become aware of his breathing. Something has changed. It's slower and seems involuntary, reflexive, not at all like the laboured breathing I'm so used to. Dad's airway has whistled and rattled since I was a kid. He was a pack-a-day guy for over fifty years who wheezed when he laughed and snorted and gasped when he slept. Now, his mouth sits open and the air seems to move freely through him.

A Mozart concerto, his favourite, plays softly in the background. He is still. I watch him intently, breathing with him — each inhale tugging my mask a little tighter, each breath out spreading warm against it. We breathe in sync and for a time, we are only breath.

Every so often, Dad's breathing stops and we all float there with him, waiting. Each time he lingers in the in-between a little longer.

The sun outside his window is setting, colouring the sky shades of apricot and gold. A bird, I don't know what kind, glides past his window. Finally, unceremoniously, he draws his final breath. Then, as if leaping between two trapeze bars, he lets go of what was and reaches for what

comes next. He is unafraid, ready to grasp what's ahead. For the first time in a long time, instead of falling, my dad is flying — and I'm so proud of him.

~Jennifer Paquette, 2022