

Dealing with death

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Near Death Experience (St James)

The family had just sat down when he arrested.

"I'm going!" he gasped.

And did.

It was just like on TV,
they came running from every direction.

"Bed Seven!" someone shouted,

and I realized it was the crash team

and you were in Bed Six, thank God.

I had one glimpse of his stricken face

then whipt me behind the arras

just as someone barked:

"Get the relatives out!"

So they missed me.

Cowering behind flowered curtains,

I put my arm around you,

thanking God again that you're a bit deaf.

We heard it all, sod patient confidentiality,
the robot talking in American:

"Shock not recommended. Check pulse.

Stand back. Apply CPD,"

at least six times.

The doctor checking the notes, the history:

"Previous aneurism. Admitted for SOB. Back pain."

Everyone knew their job, and all so calm,

doing whatever they do with their machines,

and manually.

All talking at once but not over-talking.

And my bloody phone went – *twice* –

my sister thinking it was you who was dying,

and I didn't know how to switch it off

so I stuffed it under my coat and sat on it.

Then a soft Asian voice in the midst,

like a new theme introduced into the score:

"Shall we stop?"
And all went quiet.

Lucky they'd kept you sedated.
Lucky you'd dropped one of your tablets that morning
and the nurse wouldn't give you another.
Now, wriggling backwards on the bed,
you found it in your underpants
and swallowed it quick.
We giggled silently.
I had been in at the death before
and knew what was behind the curtains.
I felt no fear at all, only for you.
And sorrow for the dead one.
Did he think strangers would be eavesdropping
on his last moments?

Footsteps, wheels, the nurse preparing the body,
removing the tubes and wires,
propping it up in a non-frightening pose.
The other old men in their alcoves trembling,
not liking to ask for help, for their evening cocoa.
Even a blood test would have been a comfort,
a professional nearby.
And, frightened, they began coughing,
And were hushed.

We heard the family come back in.
"He looks just like he's asleep," said one of them.
Then sounds of weeping.
Another got on the mobile to call more relatives
to come and say goodbye to Grandpa.

At ten o' clock you said,
"You'd better go. I'll be all right."
Distanced by your own illness,
you simply wanted rid of me
so you could put your mask back on.
I could still hear them crying.

How much longer the ward stayed that way –
one dead and three half-dead men
all behind different curtains – I do not know.
You told me later that you fell asleep.
You'd had enough excitement for one day.

Mornings

There's always a hush before it
Then she hops, legs tucked high as she can
Feels the rush of blade passing, graceful as water.
Not this time and not the next but she's getting slower,
So, one sweep, she will meet the scythe; pain, falling, oblivion.
The hooded one will saunter on, gaze travelling, gait composed.
But now she has won another day, lambent and pristine
A day without duty, waiting, passive.
Panic ebbs, the soul opens like a lotus,
Reaching for experience.

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ON THE TIDELINE

Slowly, he came round.

He knew this was the Intensive Care Unit, but he'd been dreaming of sixty years back, walking Yarmouth sands with his father,

who'd told him about Newton,
the discovery of light, how the seven colours
blend into white at last, and of how he had said:

*I seem to myself to have been like a boy playing
next to the sea, picking up some bright shell or pebble
while before me the mighty ocean lay unexplored.*

Three doctors sat round his bed.

They introduced themselves as specialists, so he knew
this was crunch time. One said:

*'Good afternoon, Mr Smith.
A scientist, aren't you? Yes, a distinguished scientist.
Four days we've been reducing your medication*

*so you can understand what's going on. It isn't
good news, I'm afraid. If we end the treatment
now, you will die. If we continue, you will*

*still die, some weeks or months from now. It would mean
kidney machines, exhaustion, a long struggle
and no good outcome. What do you wish us to do?'*

Next to the German Ocean, his father had told him
the shells he liked to pick up were the hard casing
of creatures that lived in the sand or rocks, whose bodies

were washed out by the sea when they died. *'There is no God'* –
he thought – *'but I can cope with that'*. How the old man,
a parson, had grieved when he had made the decision

to follow truth – step after logical step. He said:
*'I prefer to die now, when I'm in control. Please take
that oxygen mask; it will not be needed'*.

The February light dribbled away.

The grandchildren came in,
in tears, prepared to argue. The girl, in particular, looked
like him. He thought, I'll walk into the darkness

open-eyed; the colours will not be lost, the atoms
regroup themselves. *'I am leaving'*, he said, and turned
to the ocean.

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Unnamed

What I care to forget is his breathing.
It started as a shiver. An extra shot at breath. He was crashing. He fell quickly.
I held him.
His shivers turned to gaspy cries. The whole of his body working.
Nothing getting in.
He held my thumb.
He looked at me.
Those eyes. He knew.
I smiled for him.
Where were the other nurses?
I can't be doing this. Thirteen days of blood pooling between my legs. Me,
miscarrying. *Don't die too.*
The STEP nurse appeared, brought things to life, assessed the situation:
Give ventolin.
He turned mottled, grey
This little one
Code Blue
Call Mom
Wheel him to ICU
I took him down
Left him in that white room.
Parts of you slipping from me.
I said goodbye.
He dies. 19:33.
What happens after:
Say I bleed tonight, heavily tomorrow, the next day, terrible cramping.
And then –
Is that why I hold, am holding onto you?
I don't know how to grieve this
You were never really here
Blood never pulsed your veins
No heartbeat, toes, no mouth.
But you were started.
The night carries on. Brendon rings the call bell. He's nauseous.
15 mg of gravol
Anna presses her call button. She has to pee.
Asks, what happened,
Does Code Blues make you scared?
Nathan, ketorolac for pain.

I'm sorry
I'm sorry for my lack of connection to you
I'm sorry I didn't love you more than life the minute I felt you here
I'm sorry for not taking care of you
the way a mother would.

They discharged my son to me
this last time.
I tried hard. I took him home.

I did the feeds, gave him his meds
mostly on time
I wanted to believe
that I could do it
I wanted to be his Mom
his last breaths
last hours
I wasn't there
Some nurse - I'm sorry --

I wish I never would have put you down
watched while they bagged, defibrillated
tried to shock you into living

I wish I'd wrapped you in a blanket
held you
let you hold my thumb until you died.

The Perfect Ending.

Shhhhh. You're okay.

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ANEURYSM UMBRELLA

Hooked on the heart, the aorta's
A cane still teeming with sap,
Hanging down into the belly.
But in his, it's an umbrella
Trying to open: the aneurysm
A furled millefeuille of laminated
Blood, leaked in layers over years,
The arterial walls like batwing skin,
Stretched, distended, around ribs
Of hard fat laid down since childhood.

'This'll keep your hair curly.'
He'd curl up my crusts (always bread
Before cake), *'here, put plenty butter on,'*
A blonde topknot of Lurpak.
I ate them as spirals
Long after I'd left home, outgrown
Curly hair, all his other beliefs.

Then his backache from gardening
Became two days in bed. I brought
Food, stayed to talk, he said
Kind, loving things, opened up,
Calm, reflective, as if he knew
Better, with reason this time,
Knew something was tearing;
And between us, repairing.

Oscillation

As he aged,
His hand writing-
Once bold, round, and sharp,
Scribed with masterful strokes,
Both striking and firing,
As it fox-trotted across the page-
Became whittled down to a scrawl
Until yielding a flat line.

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The Man Who Spoke In Whispers

(for Jim, of Rotherham, who survived throat cancer and died of pneumonia decades later)

The growth plundered your voice,
robbing it of tone; you spoke
in well-articulated whispers, inhaling
through that tube thing in your throat.

You shone, in spite of it all.
No self-pity, even near the end,
after years of speaking to us
in breaths the way you did –
yet you *had* a voice, old friend.

Always the bright guy at the bar,
you brought a twinkle
even to a whisper; a susurrus of wit
would penetrate the tedious tones
of those for whom *EastEnders*
and the latest from *The X Factor*
provided fodder for bar-room babble.

Struggling to be heard but stubbornly
winning with smiles and quips,
you were never less than sparky
with your crackling one-liners
and the percussion of your Good Advice.

Quite suddenly you died;
thirteen months ago you died.
You would not wish me to reach
for a soppy synonym.
You did not pass away:
you died, you died, you died.

I handled your affairs –
so long ago, it seems;
but time and distance are
such fragile things, and grief
is no respecter of them:
whisper its name
and it will return to you.