

## A Crash Course in the Wonders of Dying

By June Leavitt

A hummingbird perches on a branch of a tree. Suddenly, it pivots its neck to stare through the window by my husband's hospice bed. I wonder if it is drawn to Daniel's hand moving slowly to his mouth as his lips open and close. Signaling to me that he wants to eat, his mouth drops open. I pick up a container of applesauce and spoon droplets into his mouth.

Here in hospice there is no tube feeding. Patients are not rushed off to the ER nor are there calls for staff to resuscitate or rumbling gurneys to radiation, chemotherapy, X-rays, MRIs or CAT scans.

Stillness pervades. Now autumn, days will shorten; light will dim and death's wintry embrace might follow. I vow to keep my husband in a mellow state of dying. He does not complain of pain, though his cancer has been spreading. I give him Reiki and homeopathic remedies. Sometimes, my youngest son wheels him in his bed to the backyard to play Janis Joplin for him. Frequently our efforts perk him up. Daniel drums his fingers to the music. He seems glad to be alive.

Yet, there are hours in his dying when it appears the ultimate drama is about to take place. Either he remains in a death-like sleep, which the nurses insist is not a coma, or he jolts out of it. Bedazzled, he murmurs, "I am going to my mother in the garden!"

"Your mother?" Because Grace died twenty years ago, his words shake me.

He motions me to come closer like he has a secret to share. "My mother is packing my bags."

I recall being told by my friend at the *shiva* for her father that before his death he saw departed relatives emerging from the walls. Were they waiting to escort him to heaven where deceased family members reunite? Sure enough, my husband's gaze alights on the curtained partition across from his bed. Quickly, I leave his room, overcome with a desire to be among the living.

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We visitors seek out the company of each other in the tiny corridors or on benches in the cloistered yard. I button up my sweater against the chill.

A female patient wheeled out to the yard by her family is being smoked. I assume it is her daughter who places a cigarette in her mouth, lets her puff and then pulls the cigarette away. The daughter sees me watching. Why would someone terribly ill inhale tar and nicotine? As if

reading my mind she explains her mother has lung cancer that spread to her brain. “There is no saving her now. Let her have what pleasure she can.”

Days later, I wander out to the shaded yard. The daughter is drawing a puff from her own cigarette. “How’s your mom?” I ask.

She blows out a stream of smoke. “Oh, she died for a brief spell last night. The nurses were covering her with a sheet and my sister and I were screaming, ‘Don’t leave us!’ All of a sudden, my mother pushed off the sheet. ‘Why did you bring me back?’ She won’t talk to us now. She’s angry we wouldn’t let her go.”

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On the good days of my husband’s dying, I rejoice that he is no longer enjoying the company of his departed mother. In a surge of vitality, he smiles at me and insists I am his true love. When he asks me to massage his back, I am thrilled. As he rolls over to his side, his hospital gown slides down and I notice his blue Hot Rodder’s tattoo made of crossed pistons on the right bicep, a relic from his teenaged days of souped-up engines. But he has lost so much bicep the pistons are shrinking.

“Dig your fingers in deep,” he says.

“It won’t hurt you?”

“No. It will be amazing.”

Our intimate life had ended as his disease became pronounced. Now I press my hands into what had been his muscles.

“Why do you suddenly like me?” he turns his neck to seek out my eyes

I whisper into his ear, “Because you’re becoming, well, softer.”

My hands move slowly over his shoulder and I find myself savoring the touch. I long to run my hands all over his body and wish there would be no diaper between him and me.

“You were tough too,” he answers. “It takes two to tango.”

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The worst tango took place at home when his disorderliness, memory lapses and outbursts of verbal fury became more pronounced.

Eventually, he was also diagnosed with suspected frontal lobe dementia. Dementia causes the gradual erasure of emotional awareness, personality and total deterioration of the mind, in my husband’s case a brilliant, academic mind. And though Daniel could still help himself to food and take short walks, he chose to sit in our living room all day waiting for directives: “Why

don't you take a shower?" I often asked.

But he would insist he had showered.

"Why don't you read, honey?"

On better days, he might pick up one of my books like *Dear Life* and sink into my chair.

On worse days he tried to pull me into incessant conversations as I headed out the door to teach. "Just tell me this. Did you read all of Alice Munro?"

"I can't talk now."

"You could have answered me already."

"Will you please let me have a few quiet moments? I need space."

"Go to NASA," he goaded me.

Cracks were forming in every cranny of my being.

The shattering came days later when Daniel called police to report me missing. I was on a pre-scheduled 24-hour field trip with my students. In the days preceding the trip, I had packed food for him labeled *breakfast*, *lunch* and *supper*. I left him simple instructions for the microwave and a list of emergency numbers. I was mortified when a patrol car pulled me off the road and said there was an APB out for me.

When I returned home, I was livid. "This is it! I'm hiring a part-time care-giver for you."

"For me?" He had shot back. "That's only for women who don't want to take care of their husbands."

Then the kicker. "And what are you doing that is so important anyway, June?"

I lunged to punch him. He pushed me out of the room. Against the shut door, I wept and babbled to God. "Liberate me! Take me from my worst self. Take my husband away."

When I was emptied of tears, I knew the time had come to answer my own prayers. I planned a getaway, something I regularly did during the summer break. After hiring a part-time caregiver for him, I booked a retreat run by mystical beekeeping nuns.

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In the chapel one night, I marveled at the calm of a nun who sat in a tiny orb of lamplight untouched by family sorrows.

My fifth week away, I got a message from my eldest son. “Dad lost consciousness. He came to. In the hospital for observation.”

It was clear: I was expected to cut my trip short. I texted back. “Will return home as scheduled.”

I called the hospital social worker and pleaded with him not to release Daniel till I returned. He cautioned me: “A hospital is a dangerous place for elderly sick people. There are infections going around here.”

Ten days later, when I arrived, my husband was running a fever in the oncology wing, having developed colitis and a clot in his lungs. Filled with guilt, I kept weeping, and the ward psychologist put her hand on my shoulder. “Do you want to come to my office and talk?”

Tissues later, I murmured to her, “Before I left, he had some quality of life. Now, he doesn’t move his body at all. The oncologist thinks it might be the dementia or...” I gulp, “lack of motivation.”

She held my hand tightly. “I know you can’t take care of him at home any longer. We have a facility...” She lowers her gaze. “For people nearing the end of life. Would you be willing to have Daniel moved there?”

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Dying is not a straight road to death. It curves and ascends to dizzying heights and hopes. The life force suddenly shows its tenaciousness, its desire not to let go of its flesh and bones. Once, a simple act at twilight, pressing my lips to my husband’s forehead, unleashed this mighty will to live. He bent his legs and twisted as if he were about to leap from bed. “Time to get out of here. I’m coming with you, June!”

“Wait! Don’t try to stand yet.”

I rushed to the hospice nurses to report this wondrous turn of events. “He is getting out of bed! Is there a penalty if he doesn’t die here?”

They remained expressionless. I had to plead with them to come see him in motion.

The nurses found Daniel fast asleep. They trooped back to their station. Vindication deferred.

“For God’s sake,” my children raise their voices when I share my belief that mystical things occur in the hospice. “Don’t you see the patch below Dad’s shoulder? It’s Fentanyl. More powerful than morphine! Of course, he is tranquil.”

They hurtle me back to a wonder-less place they call reality.

On another day, I search for a nurse among the hospice staffers, who have become my mentors.

Nora is willing to talk and I begin to pose my question.

“I can’t help but feel some of the patients are experiencing enlightenment.”

“If you like,” she replies.

“But my kids say it’s the Fentanyl.”

“Could be.” She graciously gives me a moment. “I see it differently. I see momentous transitions. Dying happens in stages and no one knows how long the course will take. It is like a birth, labor pains and then a new life. Into what I don’t know.”

I hurry back to my husband’s bedside. I call his name. I plead, “Please stay with me here on earth.” He has lost so much weight he resembles the da Vinci painting depicting emaciated St. Jerome wasting away in the wilderness.

I close the curtains, cocooning us in floral cloth. The leaden sky presses against the window, but we two are isolated from the iciness of the universe, warmed with snapshots of our life above his bed. There are our sons and daughters, and several stick figures smiling on paper, our grandkids’ wishes for Grandpa to get well.

All at once he thrusts up an arm as if someone is indeed reaching down for him. No! His mother Grace is emerging from the ceiling! I force his arm down. She cannot take him now. Ever so long ago, her son and I met by chance on a path in a forest outside Plainfield, Vermont. He had just resigned his post as philosophy professor, bought five acres and enrolled in a summer program in ecology at Goddard College. His hope was to leave academia forever and live off his land. At the end of the summer, he proposed I join him on his five acres, where we would lay down roots.

“Will you spend a lifetime with me, Juni?”

Dear God! That lifetime cannot be over. Off a dirt trail, we built a Mongolian yurt with our hands. Over the stream, he installed a hand pump for drawing water. We cut down dead trees with a chain saw and pried out the stumps with a crow bar. I remember harvesting firewood for the cold months, cutting the felled trunks into logs to stack. Once burning in our stove, the scent of wood fire laced us with warmth.

I lower the bed rail to join him on his mattress. Wherever they wheel him I will go, for I sense Daniel is melting into the all-powerful and I cannot bear to be shut out in the cold. Yet he makes no room for me in his bed. He makes a motion of farewell. He says “Bye, bye, Juni.”

I figure that he is tired and wants to doze off again. Down into the yard I go. There is a blue spruce draped in needles from crown to lower trunk. I twist off a spray that carries the scent of our homestead and take it back up to his room. He is still here. With *me* on the wondrous earth.

Bringing the sprig to his nose, he inhales deeply, pure delight in his expression. His eyes are blue wildflowers when he murmurs “Juni! The woodpile is behind us. Let’s get some logs now.”

Now all has been forgiven and we feel love again. Now we have completed the test and earned our credentials: Masters of Dying. Wintry death and spectral kindred cannot join us.

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