

The Opinion Pages

THE END

My Mother Is Not a Bird

By Julianne Grey

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The End is a series about end-of-life issues.

I stood watching my mother's last bellowing breaths. There were three of us holding her — me, my husband and my father — in the room we'd designed just for her. She was propped up in a rented hospital bed, lying on brown cotton sheets with the highest thread count I could find. My mother had been gasping like this for two days — a raspy, gurgling sound that I struggle to describe accurately with metaphors: a choking fish, a crackling microphone, a dying deer. But they all sidestep the truth. That was the sound of my 60-year-old mother dying of cancer.

So much of the conversation about death is euphemism. People use words like "passing." And in the fog of loss they leap for answers, claiming any number of things are their loved ones returning. They point at birds and butterflies and say, "That's Mom." They hear a crash in their basement and think, "There she is again."

I don't think of my mom as a thump in the basement.

Since her death two years ago, my dad has said that the sun feels like my mother's kiss. This seems like an ironic end for the woman who was the world's most fervent believer in sunscreen. Still I find myself looking up at the sun, asking, "Are you my mother?" like the bird in the children's book.

This was how the last weeks really went: I would push her dose button, massage her hand, make dinner, go for an hourlong walk, and return to do it again. I slept but still woke so I could push the morphine button and give her anti-anxiety medication in the middle of the night to stave off her agitated wails for me to please, please help her.

The hospice nurse told us we were "in the tunnel." We were submerged in her needs and whims, responding to pangs we couldn't predict or control.

When my dad helped her to the bathroom in a slow, swaying dance, she began to panic. "What's next, what's next?" she asked.

"We're doing good," my dad soothed.

"We're doing *well*," my mom answered.

She was still there: my mother, the editor. For 30 years my mother, Linda Greenspan Regan, was an editor at independent publishing houses working with Nobel laureates, where she edited

hundreds of books. And she was my lifelong editor. She raised me literary and we were best friends. We read each other's minds. We talked three times a day.

Before she died, my mother said I shouldn't see her dead body. She worried that the image would replace my good memories of her. For a long time it did.

For two years after she died, I couldn't see the hours we'd spent wrapping gifts. I couldn't see the mounds of ornaments she'd curated for my dad's eight-foot tree.

Holidays were always her favorite, and dying sent her into turbo mode. Our last Christmas, she bought 20 button-down shirts, four pairs of pants, two types of shoes and a wallet — just for my husband. Then she turned to me and asked, "How's his belt?" before dropping a new one on the pile without waiting for an answer.

This wasn't about materialism. My mother wanted us warm and well dressed for every Hanukkah and Christmas she was bound to miss.

The night she died, in October 2012, it was not a surprise to us. She had been mostly unconscious for days, sometimes offering a stray kiss or smile. Then in her last two days she'd breathed only heaving, strangling sounds.

Her gasping breaths decreased to 30 seconds apart. We stroked her arms, telling her that we loved her. When her chest puffed big and fell, I gripped her wrist. She mouthed faintly, "Love you," before her lips went slack. Her pulse slowed from one beat to nothing. Then her wrist went cold. In one beat she became a corpse.

After my mother died, so many women offered themselves in her place. One woman grabbed my cheeks, smiled into my face, and said, "I talk to my parents through a crystal glass."

"Do you believe in heaven?" she asked.

I said, "No," and her face dropped.

"But," she said. "Then where do the souls go?"

Popular paradigms of the afterlife disturbed my mother. She had nightmares of meeting crowds at the pearly gates. My mother was Jewish, and raised me Jewish, plus Christmas, to honor my father who'd been raised Catholic. Though she believed in God, all she wanted was an endless, soundless sleep.

In the hospital I asked my mother, "Do you believe in souls?"

There was such a long lull that I wondered if the machines had drowned out my words. She was only 10 feet away.

"Do I believe in *gold*?" she asked.

"Souls," I repeated. "Souls."

We both laughed.

Some say the dead speak to them in their dreams. But as mystical as they seem, dreams come from our thoughts. My mother is always in my thoughts, so she is always in my dreams. In a recent one she was 14 and chatting in the corner of a room, her face framed by her signature bob. When she turned to me, I hugged her, and wondered for that moment, “Can she know me?” before I nearly whispered, “One day you will have a daughter and she will love you so much, and that’s me.” But then I remembered how creepy that would be to say to a 14-year-old. So instead I just said, “Mommy, Mommy, I love you so much,” which might not have been better; I couldn’t help myself.

Before my mother entered hospice care at home, she was in the I.C.U. for a week. After two years of treatment, her cancer had progressed and she had irrevocable internal bleeding. It had paused but it could restart at any time. The doctors had just finished their surgery and now we had to tell her.

My father, my husband and I laved up with hand sanitizer and pulled on neon-orange coverings with blue plastic gloves. We stood by her bed, surrounded by beeping and blinking machines. We stuck to the facts. We explained what the doctors had said and her eyes went wide.

“So,” she said, “My insides are mushy, and they’re just going to get mushier and mushier.”

“Yes,” we said.

I burst into tears making her burst into tears. We hugged through the orange synthetic fabric. She whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

I had to sit down.

She thought more and then said, “If there is a heaven, and it’s the kind of place you can pull strings — I’ll pull strings for you.”

We all smiled.

She smiled even bigger. “One more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Always ask, ‘What would Linda say?’”

So what would Linda say? The answer seems as strong and as frail as each of us. To echo Douglas Hofstadter’s words in “I Am a Strange Loop,” I would say — and she might have, too — that my mother is in our minds.

Beyond books, she’s given me so much. I have her genes and her mannerisms; I keep the same piles of Post-it notes and the same hoards of tissues. I acquired her scowl of disgust and have surpassed her level of germophobia. My mom’s cooking on special occasions was a symphony of ingredients and cleaning rituals that required latex gloves and Ajax; I use up all the spoons, considering each one contaminated after a single use.

For everyone else we organized plans, but together we could just be. We worked side by side in the computer room. We watched the BBC “Pride and Prejudice” every laundry night for 10 years. My mom loved New York just as much as I do. Nothing made her happier than spending a sweltering day in Chinatown, slurping roast pork wonton soup. After my mom got sick, her humor darkened. When she heard the cicada summer would return in two years, she said, “At least I won’t have to see that.” Even when her speech was gone and she slept silently all day, our last communication came down to closed-eye kisses.

Her last two years were a slow descent, each bit removing some part of what my mom and I could do, of what it meant for her to be my mom, and what it meant for me to be her daughter. But now I know that to be her daughter is to share her memory. I’m grateful for everyone who remembers her, reads about her — or reads one of the many books she edited — because that is where she still lives.

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