

Day 1 of Dying

By Karen Dukess

Day 1 of Dying

At some point after my father was diagnosed with lung cancer 13 years ago, my mother taped a *New Yorker* cartoon to their refrigerator. A doctor sits at a big desk and is talking to a man slumped in the chair opposite him. The caption reads: “Well, now that you have it, you can stop worrying about getting it.”

My father had worried about dying for years. He worried through kidney cancer, prostate cancer, heart surgery and treatment for lung cancer. But when he gets the news the cancer is back and he has only a few months to live, he finally begins to talk about dying.

Explaining to his doctor why he decided not to have a surgical procedure that was definitely risky and possibly pointless, he says, “I had a successful career as a lawyer and businessman, and I have always favored taking a settlement.”

Day 2 of Dying

My father keeps telling me how grateful he is that my mother and sisters and I support his decision to forgo treatment. Every time he says this, I wonder if he isn't disappointed that no one said “No! Don't give up! I can't live without you!”

Day 4 of Dying

My father is talking about his life, which he says has been a good one. “I wanted a successful career and a good marriage, and those were big ambitions for a kid from Silver Birches.”

Silver Birches is a community of about ten small cottages in the woods in Peekskill, New York. It was the last of many places my father lived with his parents, who moved often for work or to avoid a debt. Most of the families in Silver Birches were city people, who came only in the summer. My father's family lived there year-round.

My father tells me his home life was not happy, which I have heard before. Now he tells me his father was mean and his mother was kind, but miserable. When my father could no longer pay his rent during law school at Columbia, he resigned himself to moving back in with his parents. His older brother, Joe, wouldn't hear of it. Joe said, “There's no way in hell I'm going to let you move back into that snake pit.”

Day 6 of Dying

I am becoming a better listener. Really, what can you say?

Day 8 of Dying

My father is home now. He stays upstairs in his bedroom, with the air conditioner on 63 degrees. This morning, my mother brings him a letter that came in the mail. “Who is this from?” my father says, turning over the envelope. The postmark is Truro. We watch him open the letter, which takes a while, and watch him read it. My mother and I are amazed that he can read the letter without first glancing at the signature to see who sent it. Finally, he gets to the end and says, “Oh! It’s from Sam.” Sam is an old friend from Cape Cod.

My father reads the letter out loud, pausing once to cough. Sam expressed his admiration for my father as a friend, and as the patriarch of a beautiful family. He wrote that he hopes my father’s last months are as comfortable as possible and that my father enjoys his final days with his wife and children and grandchildren.

I have never read that kind of note before – what do you call it, a condolence note on your impending death? It is perfect.

Day 11 of Dying

I thought I had heard all of my father’s stories, but lately he is digging up enough new material that we’ve started wondering if there isn’t something to that Memory Foam topper we put on his bed.

But there are certain words he consistently can’t retrieve.

When he was still in the hospital, he asked more than once: “What’s that thing I’m going to do when I get out of here? Oh, right. Hospice.”

This morning, he asked: “What’s that medicine they gave me?”

“Morphine,” I tell him.

“Right, morphine.”

And then: “What are those things I have that are growing?”

“Tumors?” I ask.

He nods, and says: “Now that the tumors are growing and I’m taking morphine, it doesn’t seem right that your sisters are in Puerto Rico and Pittsburgh.

He has forgotten that one of my sisters has canceled her trip, and the other is on her way.

Day 12 of Dying

Barbara C., an old friend of my parents, comes by to drop off some shrimp salad with artichoke bottoms from June & Ho in Rye. Barbara uses her cane to go upstairs to visit my

father in his room. Afterwards, sitting with my mother and me in the porch, she tells us how wonderful it is that my father is still “as sharp as a tack.” Her husband was senile for years before he died. He often didn’t recognize Barbara, except when he got angry at her for treating him like a child.

“You are so lucky,” Barbara says.

Day 15 of Dying

The hospice nurse reminds my father to use the nebulizer, which he is supposed to do several times a day. I watch him press his lips around the tube and inhale the cold steamy medicine. When I ask if it helps, he takes the tube out of his mouth, shrugs and says, “It makes Mom feel better.”

Day 17 of Dying

I ask my father if I can get him anything, a glass of water or pineapple-orange juice. He shakes his head and, then, after a few seconds, says: “An egg cream. A chocolate egg cream.”

We buy seltzer, milk and chocolate syrup and make my father an egg cream, his first in 50 or 60 years. “Delicious,” he says.

Day 18 of Dying

My father wants to hear my son Johnny play the piano, but is too weak to go downstairs. We help him walk to the top of the stairs, where he sits in an office chair on wheels and listens to Johnny play Maple Leaf Rag and New York State of Mind. He smiles and taps his foot.

Johnny tells me later that he pounded the keys so hard to make it loud enough for Tata to hear that some of the picture frames fell from the piano to the floor.

Day 22 of Dying

There were times when you would have thought my father’s hand was attached to my mother’s hand. In a restaurant, he would reach for the breadbasket and her hand would move out to stop his. He would scowl and pull his hand back (sometimes with a piece of bread or a roll and sometimes not) and hers would return to her lap.

My father can finally eat whatever he wants, and my mother is OK with that. But of course he has lost his appetite.

Day 24 of Dying

When I was 13, I tried a cigarette for the first time, standing in my parent’s bedroom, right where my father’s Zero Gravity Lift Chair now sits. I watched myself in the long mirror on the bathroom door. I liked the way I looked with a cigarette, but because my father smoked and I hated the smell, I never took up the habit.

It didn't bother me too much that my boyfriend was a smoker when we started going out. We were in our 20s; people smoked.

He is my husband now, and he coughs in his sleep and isn't even aware of it.

Please don't ask me about his smoking.

Days 25, 26, 27 and so on

Visiting my father has become a question of getting the timing right; for three days, when I stop by, he is sleeping. One morning, I stretch out on the chaise lounge in his room and watch him sleep. His hands, bony and mottled with bruises, rest on his thighs. His legs, as thin as sticks, poke from beneath the afghan that covers his body.

Suddenly, I remember a day long ago when he was strong:

I am 10, at sleep-away camp on Cape Cod, and homesick. In letters to my parents, whose summer house is only a half-hour away, I write "camp is great, but could I come home – for good – on visiting day?" and "don't forget we go to the beach every Sunday! Maybe you could meet me there?"

One Sunday morning, I am walking along the hot sand on Nauset Beach with my bunkmates. Our counselor is telling a story, and we are hanging on her every word. I am looking at the sand bar and tugging on my bathing suit, when one of the girls sneers "oh, my, god – why is that man running right at us?"

I look up the beach and see the man. He is tan and strong, with dark wavy hair. We stop and he keeps running, getting larger and larger. When he is right in front of us, he drops to his knees and flings out his arms. My bunkmates look at him, horrified, and follow his gaze to see who he is looking at. I want to run away. My father waits, smiling a huge smile. I step forward, my heart pounding, and hide my head in his chest.

Karen Dukess has been a tour guide in the former Soviet Union, a newspaper reporter at the St. Petersburg Times in Florida, and the founding features editor of The Moscow Times in Russia. She has written book reviews for USA Today and blogged about raising teen-aged boys at theblunderyears.com and the Huffington Post. She has performed her writing at Writers Read in Chelsea and is a member of the Terzo Piano writer's group. She is a speechwriter at the UN Development Programme and lives in Pelham, New York.

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