A Death in Chicago, 1972: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and My Family
By Pat Arnow
As soon as he could, at age 57, Dad retired and joined Mom full time in her pottery business.

At last he was a happy man.

Just a year later

My stomach hurts bad.

A month more

This stuff the doctor recommended doesn't do anything.

Another month

We'll open you up and see what's going on in there.

We just closed him back up.

Pancreas... tumors... metastasized all over.

We won't tell him.

The unfamiliar words flew by. I looked up metastasize, later—spread or grow. Here are the words we didn't hear: cancer, terminal.
IN 1971, PEOPLE DIDN'T ASK WHAT ARE THE CHANCES, WHAT ARE THE CHOICES, WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS PEOPLE JUST SAID.

RADIATION AND CHEMOTHERAPY—AT THE TIME, WE HAD NO IDEA WHAT HE WAS SAYING.

I CAN'T FIND A POSITION THAT DOESN'T HURT.

WHAT AM I GOING TO DO?

IN 1971, NO ONE DISCUSSED ADEQUATE PAIN RELIEF EITHER.
"DEATH." "DYING."

NO DOCTOR NOR ANYONE IN MY FAMILY INCLUDING DAD HAD EVER SAID THOSE WORDS.

IT JUST WASN'T DISCUSSED, EVER.

THIS BOOK, PUBLISHED IN 1969, NOT LONG BEFORE MY FATHER BECAME ILL, WAS FILLED WITH INTERVIEWS WITH THE DYING.

IT STARTED WHAT WOULD BECOME THE HOSPICE MOVEMENT.

BUT WHEN IT CAME OUT, DOCTORS WEREN'T READY.

MY FAMILY WAS READY.

THE PSYCHIATRIST/AUTHOR, ELISABETH KUBLER-ROSS, DESCRIBED FIVE STAGES OF DYING:

DENIAL
ANGER
BARGAINING
DEPRESSION
ACCEPTANCE

IT MIGHT NOT BE THAT SIMPLE, BUT IT GAVE PEOPLE A WAY TO DEFINE WHAT WAS HAPPENING.

WE WERE NOT ALONE.
ONE DAY DAD STARTED HALLUCINATING.

WE'LL TAKE HIM TO THE HOSPITAL.

DON'T WORRY DAD. PEOPLE PAY MONEY FOR DRUGS TO SEE WHAT YOU'RE SEEING.

DID I JUST SAY THAT TO MY FATHER?

OK PATTY.

DAD RELAXED INTO HIS VISIONS.

WHOA! THE HOUSE IS COVERED IN MARSHMALLOW FLUFF?

OH! AND LOOK AT THAT!

WHAT?

RIGHT THERE. ALL THAT STUFF YOU CAN'T SEE.

HE'S HAD TOO MUCH DEMEROL.

HE'LL BE OK.

WE'LL KEEP HIM.

WHEN THE DEMEROL WORE OFF, DAD FELT BAD.

THEY WERE STILL TREATING HIM WITH RADIATION AND CHEMO, WHICH MADE HIM SICKER.

I CALLED UP DR. KÜBLER-ROSS.

WHAT?

THE AUTHOR OF THAT BOOK YOU GAVE ME.

SHE'S IN CHICAGO, YOU KNOW.

WOW MOM!

SHE'S COMING TO SEE YOUR DADDY.
DR. KUBLER-ROSS SAW DAD BEFORE SHE MET THE FAMILY. IN THE HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM, WE SAT NERVOUSLY.

A SMALL WOMAN APPEARED. SHE SPOKE QUIETLY, WITH A SLIGHT GERMAN ACCENT.

I ASKED MR. ARROW IF HE KNEW WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO HIM. HE SAID HE KNEW HE WAS DYING, EVEN THOUGH NO ONE TOLD HIM THAT.

HE SAID HE COULD SEE IT ON YOUR FACES AFTER THE OPERATION.

I ASKED HIM WHAT HE WANTED. NO ONE HAD THOUGHT TO ASK.

I WANT TO STOP THESE TREATMENTS.
I WANT TO GO HOME.

DO YOU WANT HIM TO COME HOME?

YES
**WHICH ONE OF YOU IS PATTY?**

**ME?**

**I asked him who—besides Mrs Arnow—he trusted.**

**ME! I'M THE SCREW-UP IN THE FAMILY.**

**PATTY, I TRUST PATTY.**

**YOU AND YOUR MOTHER CAN LEARN HOW TO GIVE MORPHINE INJECTIONS, I'LL GO ARGUE WITH HIS DOCTORS, THIS COULD TAKE SOME TIME.**

**THE DOCTORS EITHER DIDN'T KNOW OR CARE THAT A PSYCHIATRIST WHO WAS A BEST-SELLING AUTHOR ABOUT DYING WAS CHALLENGING THEM.**

**...TOO SICK TO GO... IT ISN'T DONE, WE NEED MAXIMUM INTERVENTION! WE CAN ONLY GIVE INJECTIONS HERE, WE WON'T DISCHARGE HIM.**

**THE NURSES ON THE FLOOR WERE MORE ENLIGHTENED. YOU CAN PRACTICE ON THIS ORANGE.**

**A NURSE EVEN VOLUNTEERED TO LET US PRACTICE ON HER.**

**DR. KÜBLER-ROSS PREVAILED AND DAD CAME HOME. IT WAS MAY 1972. HE HAD BEEN SICK FOR A YEAR.**
IN THE HOSPITAL THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN NONE OF THAT—FAMILY AND FRIENDS COMPANIONABLY SITTING AROUND, TAKING TURNS IN THE SICKROOM, OR WOULD THERE BE PEACE OR GOOD PAIN RELIEF FOR MY DAD.

DR. KURLER ROSS SENT A NURSE TO VISIT EVERY COUPLE OF DAYS. JANE KENNEDY, WARM AND DIRECT, HAD JUST COME OUT OF PRISON AS A WAR PROTESTER. SHE HAD BROKEN INTO AND DESTROYED FILES AT Dow CHEMICAL, MANUFACTURER OF NAPALM. THAT WAS A TERRIBLE INCENDIARY WEAPON USED IN VIETNAM.

SHE PROVIDED HOSPICE CARE BEFORE MOST PEOPLE KNEW WHAT HOSPICE WAS.
IN THE LAST COUPLE OF DAYS, WHEN I SAT WITH MAD, WE JUST LOOKED AT EACH OTHER.

HELD HANDS

THERE WAS A GURGLE AS HE BREATHED.
AFTER TWO WEEKS AT HOME
DAD PEACEFULLY
STOPPED BREATHING.
HE WAS 59.

MOM WAS 51.
SHE LIVED TO 72 AND NEVER GOT OVER HIM.
IN HER LAST FEW DAYS, SHE OFTEN SAW DAD
IN HER ROOM AT THE NURSING HOME.
HE LOOKED YOUNG AND HANDSOME IN HIS ARMY UNIFORM.

WHEN DAD DIED, I WAS 23
AND HAD GROWN UP.
DAD HAD TRUSTED ME.
I HELPED HIM
AND GAINED AN INEFFABLE SENSE OF THE SWEETNESS OF LIFE.
Pat Arnow is a photographer, writer, and more lately, a cartoonist in New York. She often writes and draws stories about death. “Posey’s Plan: A Memoir of a Timely Death” is the story of a reclusive woman in a big high rise and a small, informal community that made it possible for her to choose her own end. Arnow presented “Posey’s Plan” at the Comics and Medicine conference in 2018. She also exhibited illustrations from it and spoke on a comics panel at Reimagining Death in New York—a death panel! With “A Death in Chicago, 1972,” she tells the story of her father’s dying, which involved Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, because it’s a personal story from a time of momentous change in the way we think about death.

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