

The Last Goodnights: Assisting My Parents With Their Suicides, by John West

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By Susan Ager

Even if I didn't like John West's book, I would treat him gently. His parents put him in a spot whose anguish most of us are spared.

For almost a year, he acted as, in his words, "valet, chauffeur, bodyguard, therapist and stage-manager" to his father and mother as he plotted ways to help each of them end their lives with dignity. Their youngest child, he was also the most trusted to get things done right, and his memoir is also wrenching for its depiction of siblings West fears might hobble his parents' plans.

He calls it the Plan -- his father's suicide -- and the Plan, Part Two, his mother's. Both are in their mid-70s, respected professionals in psychiatry and psychology, two people who know their minds and ask directly and repeatedly for his help. His father's body is riddled with a ferocious cancer, while his mother struggles in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease.

West lives 1,100 miles from Los Angeles, in Seattle, but flies back and forth to comfort, assess, strategize and rehearse. He suffers, too, in part because he must keep the Plans secret for fear of "Joe Friday," the law. California, like most states, prohibits assisting anyone in the act of suicide.

At first I wondered how 224 pages would be spent describing what seemed like a straightforward task. Upping his morphine, West's father advises at one point, "should do the trick." But it is never so simple as you'd think.

His mother's case is particularly complex. She has bad days and good, sometimes weeping in her bed, but chuckling at her son's mordant humor and even joking back. West worries, though, that her losses will avalanche until she forgets their Plan, can't give the go-ahead he needs and devolves into what he calls "walking broccoli."

He tells his mother he might write a book and she likes that idea, and it's a relief to hear it for the reader, because clearly he takes close notes on their conversations, with all her inglorious garble. Never does he say if he feels the account might still make him vulnerable to the law, except to reveal that his parents' closest friends, to whom he confided the tale, were "grateful that I helped," and convinced the book might help change the law.

West is a trial attorney, not a writer, so some of the scenes seem harshly told, unpolished, untidy. Indeed, the opening lines might put off some readers immediately: "I don't know what my booze bill was for that time, but I'm sure it was big. I had a good reason, though: I had to kill my parents. ... If that doesn't justify throwing back an extra glass or three of Jameson's on the rocks, then I don't know what does."

By the end of his painful tale, you will sympathize. And in your imagination, his mother and dad may come to resemble your own.

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