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## Till Death Do Us Part

by Martha Clarkson

Until her cancer, my mother had an ambidextrous personality. During the day she was a kind, intelligent woman who bonded with animals and children. After 5:00 p.m., the drinking started, from a half-gallon jug of Smirnoff vodka hidden behind the onion bin. The booze, poured into a yellow Tupperware cup to sit like an innocent glass of water next to the sink, turned her into a vaguely coherent, barely upright woman who overcooked beef and felt compelled to dial the people in her address book. *Abhorred* would be a good way to describe her view of sex: her messages to me at thirteen were, “never call a boy” and “never let a boy kiss you.” Yet driving by a couple making out at a bus stop could cause a near collision with her faithful gawking. An avid reader, her nightstand was piled with innocuous James Herriott animal books, but folded into the guest towels in the linen closet I found romance novels with bare-chested heroes (and sometimes heroines). She smoked outside, thinking I didn’t know, hiding the packs of Kools in a souffle dish in the cupboard above the plates. In order to sneak a cigarette in our overgrown side yard, she’d dispatch me to chores in other parts of the house.

Why should her death be any less ambiguous?

An inordinate amount of my parents’ friends died in their early 50s, but I never once witnessed my mother attend a funeral. “I just can’t,” she’d say, an hour or so before the agreed time of departure, sitting in her usual chair at the kitchen table, her slim frame hunched, forehead in hand, a clear signal that nothing more was to be asked of her. My father’s lips would tighten as he turned on his wingtips and made for the door. On those nights, she drank more than normal, weaving into walls in her padded mules and slurring sentences into the telephone.

I never saw her cry, but when a call came about a friend’s death, she’d have a stricken look, her eyes wide and her brow furrowed. She’d never announce the news with, “He died,” only “He passed away.” In the same cushioning way, I was told not to say, “She’s pregnant,” but “she’s expecting.” She used language to hide her fears.

Before her official diagnosis, she’d been wrangling with her medical care, complaining she couldn’t get anyone to listen to her, that she just didn’t *feel good*. With the newest doctor came the blow – pancreatic cancer. Both a smoker and a diabetic, along with the forty-two years of drinking straight vodka, her body’s decomposition was no surprise. Four years earlier, she’d been yellow with jaundice, a symptom of cirrhosis of the liver, and given a prognosis of six months. She quit drinking cold turkey after that and the liver began to repair. But the pancreas could make no such accommodation.

Winter/Spring 2008

Editor's Note

Guidelines

Contact

She phoned to tell me the news. I was two hundred miles away in my garage, unloading groceries from my trunk and racing to teach a poetry class. It was the first and only time she'd called my cell phone and the call lasted no more than a couple of minutes. She knew what she had to say, and she said it, hanging up before I could wade past my emotions to discuss the details.

I drove to see her the next day; to talk to the doctor, trigger the hospice process, figure out the needs for her living situation. The new doctor didn't offer any fruit comparison for the tumor's size, just a time line: "three to six months, or any minute." The tumor was nestled next to a major artery.

I hadn't seen her in three months and she was thin as an x-ray, her cheeks sunken and her jawbone too prominent. Her eyes had purple circles under them. She'd started shopping at Value Village in her later years, and she was wearing someone else's housecoat, clasped at the neck with a clothespin, where a button should've been. I assumed I'd have to take on the dreaded activity of calling her friends and relatives to impart the news. I couldn't allow the situation to be left in her obtuse hands.

But I never had to. By the time I arrived, she'd called them all and had the list to show me, with red stars beside the people who weren't home. She'd return those calls later.

Over the course of the next week, she stoically held the phone's receiver and dialed her remaining friends who hadn't been home the first time. I listened from the kitchen, repeatedly hearing her matter-of-fact announcement, "I have cancer and I'm going to die soon and I just wanted to let you know." She didn't call her disease by another name and she didn't say "pass away." She said "die," without a waver in her voice.

And die she did, on a Wednesday just days after her seventy-ninth birthday, two months after the diagnosis. Her niece lived with her during the weekdays, and I commuted on weekends. The Monday evening before she died, she called me at 6:00 p.m. I was changing clothes for my weekly bowling league.

"I called to say good-bye," she said. "This is it."

I could barely speak through my tears, struck with the overwhelming notion that I would never again see one of two people who have known me longest. I told her I would miss her and that I loved her. She told me the same, tearless, and hung up. I lay crumpled on the couch, choking out tears like a child. I called hospice and asked our nurse to foresee the future. Frustrated and bouncing between decisions, I decided to wait until the morning to travel.

My mother called at 8:00 a.m. the next day. She hadn't died and she was angry. She railed in favor of assisted suicide and swore (which she

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never did) at a merciless God. Hospice showed up with liquid morphine.

By the time I arrived that afternoon, she was lying on her back in bed, mumbling and sometimes moaning, denied her own terms of the night before. Her niece had taken a much-needed respite with a friend and we had the duplex to ourselves. She remained nestled in the powerful wing of the drug until she died twenty-four hours later. To kill time, I cleaned up the duplex, throwing her half-gone carton of cigarettes in the trash, along with some old receipts she kept bunched in a chip clip. Each time the moaning started up again, I administered morphine from one of the tiny brown bottles. Hospice had told me the dying can hear right up to the end, so I told her she'd been a good mother, even though that hadn't always been true. Back in the kitchen, I held the trash bag to the table's edge and swept in her piles, taking her spiral date book in my hand for a moment, then letting it too drop in the bag. I kept looking over my shoulder. Even though I knew it couldn't happen, I expected to see her filling the doorway.

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**Martha Clarkson** manages design for a large tech company and writes poetry and fiction. Find her work in *Elimae*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Seattle Review*, *Anderbo*, *Nimrod*, and at [www.marthaclarkson.com](http://www.marthaclarkson.com). Her work has been commended in *Best Non-Required Reading 2007 and 2009* and she's had a Pushcart nominations. A native of Portland, Oregon, Martha receives mail in Kirkland, WA.

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