

Coping

I tiptoe through the quiet house, push open the bedroom door and peep inside. In the faint light that comes around the edges of the shrouded window I can see my mother sitting up slightly, white-faced, mouth agape, snoring. The hospital bed with its rails dominates the room. On the dressing table, previously so neat, stand soothing lotions, talcum powder, bottles promising to relieve indigestion and constipation, Lindor chocolate balls, cards, a box of disposable latex gloves, a vase of wilting flowers.

How I had dreaded this open-ended visit. You wouldn't want to be anywhere else, someone had told me. Actually, what I really want is to be far away and capable of pretending that none of this is happening.

Her eyes open and she gives me a beautiful smile. 'Hello, Mum,' I say softly.

'Hello, Mum,' she answers.

It is June. When I last visited, in March, she had been frail but not bedridden, and could still converse normally. We'd talked about whether she should see another doctor, someone less 'negative' than her oncologist, who had told her that she would not get better. I had refrained from mentioning that not only did he think she would 'not get better', he thought she would 'get progressively worse' and probably only had a few months to live. She's always been adamant about not wanting anyone to tell her when to die, to point the bone at her. I felt like I was groping in the dark, trying to read her, wishing I had a better instinct for working out what to say and what to leave unsaid. Struggling to determine what was appropriate: what was being open and what was just being brutal.

People often tell me what a fighter my mother is, how much they admire her courage. I smile and nod but am not sure I agree. For me, the cancer is the fighter, a relentless opponent, always coming at her with another jabbing punch. To her breast, chest, hip, groin, then most recently, her brain.

Mum's chief defense has been an unflagging but anxiety-ridden optimism, her attitude is quite literally never-say-die. As the number of tumour battle sites increased, I could see that the odds were stacked against her, but she never reasons in terms of probabilities. She takes refuge in the good news stories told by survivors, she quests after the miracle cure that will confound medical science, she prays to God for healing. Is this courage, I ask myself? This refusal to accept the most likely outcome, this frenetic hunt for an escape clause? Isn't courage facing up to what is happening? Being able to admit that evening is drawing near and yet finding strength and grace enough to live in the sunshine of every precious moment?

Once, not long after the diagnosis of brain metastases, I said to her, 'Can't you just enjoy each day without worrying about how many are left?'

'Well, Janene,' she pointed out. 'It's easy to be philosophical about it when you're not the one lying here.'

After that I stopped questioning how she was coping.

Auntie Caroline makes it bearable. She has always been a zestful extrovert, someone able to light up dark corners with her crackling wit and exuberance. When she is around it is impossible to be serious and solemn, no matter how dire the situation. She dubs us Nurse 1 and Nurse 2 and

we become a team. Dad is not on the staff, he has returned to his normal routine now that we are there to take care of Mum.

A week ago, Auntie Caroline brought Mum home from the Palliative Care Unit. She teaches me the techniques she has learned for managing a bedridden patient. How to use the special set of red slippery sheets to roll Mum from one side to another so we can change her nappy. How to use a pelican belt to hoist her out of bed and onto the commode or into a wheelchair. How to tuck small pillows between her legs so her knees and ankles don't chafe together and cause bedsores. How to make jokes to dissolve tension into laughter.

Community nurses come each morning to give Mum a bed-bath. I admire their easy competence and take mental note of slight improvements Auntie Caroline and I could make to our repertoire of techniques. One of the nurses asks me if I have any nursing experience. 'No,' I say.

'Well, if you've been a mother, you can be a nurse.'

Certainly, the similarities are striking. We are surrounded by all the apparatus of infancy: nappies for incontinence, bibs for spoon-feeding, rails on the bed to stop inadvertent tumbles, a baby monitor for alerting us to discomfort in the night. Even speech is regressing. Mum begins sentences that falter and remain unfinished: thoughts slipping away before she can marshal the words to express them. Mostly she parrots back phrases. When I say: 'Mum, it's time for dinner'; she repeats: 'It's time for dinner.'

Feeding Mum dinner is one of my least favourite tasks. Breakfast is fine – I open the curtains

and the fresh day dances into the room, Mum smiles, the bowl of porridge slips down smoothly. At lunchtime we are often outside, sometimes with a visitor, so the meal takes place in sunshine accompanied by talking and laughter. But the evening meal is a grimly drawn-out process. Mum, tired and cantankerous, chomps each mouthful for an eternity, averting her face if I am too hasty in raising another forkful toward her lips. I get little response to anything I say, but if I stay silent the dimly-lit bedroom fills with the sounds of mastication and I have always hated listening to other people chewing and swallowing.

Between the delivery of one mouthful and the next, I realise that a solution to my martyrdom has been sitting quietly in the corner of the room all along. I flip the switch on the television and David Attenborough bounds onto the screen, exclaiming over the fascinating social habits of the naked burrowing mole rats of Kenya.

Brief escapes are sanity-savers. My daily walk, a brisk five kilometers, with a choice of three directions from the crossroad, is not just exercise, it is a breath of fresh air, a chance to stretch out, an opportunity to think, a stress-reliever. If it is raining when I wake up, I feel cheated.

One day, back in March when Mum was well in comparison to how she is now, I decided to ignore the looming grey clouds and walk anyway. I didn't want Mum to worry about me if it started raining, so I made a point of telling her that I didn't care about the weather. It's a warm day, I assured her, a bit of rain won't hurt me. No, I didn't want to take a coat, it would make me too hot.

I felt quite daring as I strode out into the first of a succession of light showers. My clothes were dampened, but not my spirits. Between showers the sun emerged and steam rose up from the

road and from me. However, as I got near the old church on the fringe of Newrybar the rain came down in earnest and within ten seconds I was soaked.

I did a rapid about-face. I was two kilometers from home and I walked all the way back through a waterfall of rain. My tee-shirt became a sodden dripping rag that clung to my body like those provocative opening shots from Ask the Leyland Brothers. Water slid off my face in rivulets. I was glad that I had left my watch behind, but worried about my shoes. In addition to direct hits from the downpour, they were being assaulted by run-off from the road. As I dodged splashes from smug car drivers I realised I was happy in an incredulous, what-an-experience-I'm-having sort of way.

Mum was still in bed, enjoying raisin toast and tea that Dad had brought her. I capered on the lawn outside her window and she laughed to see me so drippingly wet. She got up, waved me around to the laundry door and met me there with a big fluffy towel.

She was a lot better then. She'd had the brain tumours about nine months, and although she had become unsteady on her feet, she was still mobile and still able to hold a conversation. But on that day, the day of my wet walk, I realised not only how appallingly unreliable her short-term memory had become, but also how aware she was of it failing. In the Women's Health Diary that she used to record medical appointments, daily symptoms and tablets taken, there was a new kind of entry in her shaky, spidery handwriting, a message to herself:

7:30am - 2 panadol. Janene has gone for a walk in the rain.