Walking the Floor Over You

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The author shares with us the experiences that surrounded the death of his mother-in-law, the way in which the family responded to her death, and the effect it had, most particularly, on his wife as she wrestled with what seemed to be her mother's desire to "get even" just before dying. The case study demonstrates how destructive feelings, words, and actions were used by both the mother and the daughter to liberate constructive life-affirming impulses.

Bea's condition had gotten progressively worse. In the five years since Charlie, my father-in-law, had died, she'd had two hip replacements, a knee replacement, and, in her final year, she'd had a pacemaker installed. As she mourned the loss of her husband of forty years, she seemed to be always recovering from some major physical assault on her body. I often thought about Bea's surgeries in terms of her feelings about Charlie's death. The heart operation to install a pacemaker arose from an emergency; there was nothing optional about that. But the hip and knee replacement surgeries, done to alleviate the pain caused by arthritic deterioration of joints and to restore her mobility, were elective. These intensively invasive surgeries, requiring prolonged and painful recoveries, were always a mystery to me. Ultimately Bea seemed to gain little freedom of movement and endured years of painful rehabilitation. It was hard for those around her to understand why she put herself through it or how it could have been worth it. What seemed clear was that she was always recovering. We tried to understand the calculus of these painful equations: a string of

violent surgeries plus prolonged painful recoveries equaling a gratifying life. There seemed to be factors in these equations that were invisible to us, but which made it all balance out for Bea.

In her last year, she suffered from symptoms of Parkinson's disease. She had increasing difficulty walking. She would stand up from her chair and try to walk, but she couldn't make her feet move. Her body would rock and shimmy; she'd will her feet to move, but they wouldn't. Tears of frustration would stream down her grimacing face. Your heart would break just watching her. Her mind began to seriously deteriorate too: the Parkinson's brought with it its own sort of dementia. Always one for the occasional non sequitor, Bea's confusion and profound lapses of memory were now startling. My wife, Pat, would go up to visit for a couple of days, a five-hour trip across two states, return home, and no sooner walk into the house but the phone would ring: it was Bea having already forgotten their visit together. We encouraged her to move into an assisted-living facility, but she didn't want to leave her home. Then after a series of falls that left her on the floor for hours before someone happened upon her, an emergency hospitalization brought on by her failure to remember to take numerous medications, and another hospitalization following a fall, Pat moved her to a nursing home. Once when we went up to visit, Pat and Cameron, our son, left the lounge area where we were sitting. Bea's face knotted up like a fist, and she began to cry silently. I moved next to her and held her hand. "I never thought that it would come to this," she said. I said, "I know. I'm sorry."

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We didn't know what to do. Pat's sister called Wednesday night and said, "Gordon just visited Mom in the nursing home. He said she looked bad, real bad. The pneumonia is worse. Maybe you should come up." The plan to travel up that coming weekend was abandoned and early the next morning, filled with an urgent feeling of dread, we made a tense drive up Route 95 in the rain. The highway was clotted with trucks, the concrete roadway fractured by the harshest winter in decades. Arriving at the nursing home, Pat was met by an empty room: Bea had been taken to the hospital. We drove fast toward the hospital, uncertain of our way, visibility hampered by the rain. The emergency wing was under construction, so we had to enter at the opposite end of the hospital and half-run down corridors and roped off passageways lit by light bulbs dangling from cables. As we anxiously entered the emergency suite and headed to the nurses' station, I glanced to my

left and saw a number of people working on an ancient white-haired woman on a gurney. Bea? No, it looked nothing like her. At the desk the nurses confirmed that the woman I'd seen had in fact been Bea, but now she was gone, whisked off to x-ray. We paced the empty examination room and waited. When they wheeled her back, lying flat on the gurney, we were shocked by the way she looked. Her skin was waxy yellow like a bean. Her uncombed white hair lifted straight off her forehead as if it had been blown back in a gale. Her flesh fell away to show the skull beneath her skin. It was as if death were inside her, transforming her facial features into his.

"Hello, Dan," she said softly with surprising clarity. I didn't think she'd recognize me—I hadn't recognized her. Although she was unable to open either her right eye or her right hand, the Parkinson's seemed to have receded from her mind. "Have you been here long?" she asked matter-of-factly. "No, Ma, we just got here." Pat kissed her mother on the cheek. Bea turned to Cameron, "Did you bring the dog?" "Yeah, she's in the car," he responded, happy to have something so simple to say, so shocked was he by his grandmother's appearance. We made small talk, sidestepping the gravity of the occasion. "I've been walking the floor over you," Bea said. "What'd you say, Ma? Did you overhear someone talking in the hall?" Pat responded, moving her face closer to her mother's. Bea looked at her daughter impassively out of one eye. "I'm not going back to the nursing home," she announced. "No, Ma." "Good, I hated the place." A few minutes later Bea again said out of the clear blue, "I've been walking the floor over you." "What'd you say, Ma?" Pat asked confused. Later, as we left the room, I asked Pat what her mother had been saying. "It's a song lyric. I don't know what she's talking about."

We stayed through the weekend. The kids all came up to visit their grandmother one last time. I was so proud of us all. Not knowing, struck dumb in a depth of sorrow, each of us confronted the death in Bea head on. Zach, her twenty-six-year-old grandson, brought flowers. In response she asked him to turn around; he slowly pirouetted. Frail and barely able to move, she raised her claw-like hand in a high sign, winked her one eye, and gave the slightest approving nod to her head as if to say: a fine handsome young man. He burst into tears and briefly left the room to muffle his sobs before rejoining us gathered around her bed. Pat and Nonnie, mother and daughter, on either side of the bed, both held Bea's hands: three generations. "How are your little girls?" Bea asked Nonnie. "They're great. They're back at the house with Michael," Nonnie said. Two great-granddaughters—Bea smiled faintly. On Sunday, Mother's Day, we stopped at the hospital to see

Bea one last time before leaving. "You're headed back?" she asked, faintly audible. "Yeah, Ma, we have reservations on the one o'clock ferry." Pat sat at her side, Bea barely able to move, her head tilted toward her daughter. After several silent moments, Pat told her mother, "You were a great Ma." Pat's speaking, understanding her mother as past, caused me to cry deeply. We stayed with Bea silently for some time. Then it was time to go. After pulling the sheet up to her mother's chin, Pat left first, her eyes brimming with tears. I walked around from the other side of the bed, Bea following me with her one eye. Her claw-like hand shook under the sheet. I bent down to adjust the sheet around her hand. "Take good care of her," Bea whispered. "I will," I said.

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Monday I came home to find Pat sitting at the table. "I looked up that song on the Internet, 'Walking the Floor over You,' " she said, handing me several pages of sheet music. "I figured out what she was saying." I read the lyrics to a country song written by Ernest Tubb.

You left me and went away
You said you'd be back and just that day
You've broken your promise and left me here alone
I don't know why you did dear, but I do know that you're gone

I'm walking the floor over you
I can't sleep a wink that is true
I'm hoping and praying as my heart breaks right in two
Walking the floor over you

Now darling you know I love you well
I love you more than I can ever tell
I thought you loved me and always would be mine
But you went and left me here with troubles on my mind

Now someday you may be lonesome too
Walking the floor is good for you
Just keep right on walking and it won't hurt you to cry
Remember that I love you and I will the day I die

Pat was beside herself. "How could she think that I'd do that, abandon her? I had no choice." To a daughter who had always looked out for her mother, who had spent countless hours caring for Bea after every surgery, it seemed terribly unfair. Having been previously

distracted by all the arrangements around her mother's health, now feeling deeply hurt by her mother's words, Pat for the first time felt the fullness of her anger at Bea's dying.

At half past six the next morning we got a call from Bea's doctor saying that Bea was scheduled for an emergency gall bladder surgery that afternoon. The x-rays and tests revealed she had an infected gall bladder. Did we approve the surgery? Pat didn't feel that she could say no and deny her mother a potentially life-saving surgery recommended by her physician. I called my analyst. We okayed the surgery. At ten o'clock the surgeon called to notify us that Bea would certainly die during the surgery and would need to be resuscitated and placed on life support. He said this had to be understood in terms of Bea's living will in which she had expressed her wish for no resuscitation and life support. Okay, we understood. Then at one o'clock the anesthesiologist called. He had just examined Bea and said that he didn't believe that it was physically possible for him to intubate her, her body had so deteriorated. He had just read her living will; this procedure was entirely inconsistent with her wishes. He recommended not performing the surgery. Based upon his recommendation, Pat called off the surgery. The next morning the nursing staff stopped administering antibiotics. We had turned a corner; the pneumonia was allowed to run its course.

Pat had reservations for Saturday morning on the eight o'clock ferry. She was determined to see her mother one last time, to tell her face-to-face that she never abandoned her, that placing her in the nursing home had been the only choice. Even if she spoke to Bea in a coma, she felt her mother would hear her. Pat called the nurses' station several times each day to check on Bea's condition, to make sure that her mother was not in pain. On Friday morning at eleven o'clock Bea died.

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"The death certificate arrived in the mail, and it listed the cause of death as pneumonia, not me! I wasn't the cause of her death. How could my mother blame me for her death? Could I have prevented the Parkinson's and pneumonia? Could I have kept her from falling all those times? Could I have kept her mind clear enough to take those pills that would keep her heart going? It was death. How could I stop death? And how could she blame me, how could my own mother do that to me?"

"It's transference. It's not you. It's her mother of nine children who couldn't do enough for her. It was Charlie who left her after forty

years. You were supposed to magically keep her alive in spite of illness and her wish to die."

"I won't accept the blame. She was angry and bitter. She spent a life caring for others and she'd lost herself; she'd given up knowing what she wanted. She died without having gotten what she wanted because she'd sacrificed her life; she'd given up her life to others. How could she blame me?"

"It was suicide. She's been attacking herself for years since your father died, one surgical self-attack after another. Here at the last minute she turned her self-hatred outward. A desperate and healthy move, but too little too late. Who else could she say this to? Who else could accept her hatred? And who could blame her? She hadn't gotten what she wanted. Charlie's leaving her had broken her heart, and now she's dying. Certainly someone has to be blamed for this."

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The shopping bag pulled heavily on my arm. The ashes of Charlie and Bea filled two metal canisters resting at the bottom of a paper sack. They had a weight, a substance; they were surprisingly heavy. No longer a nose, a cheek, a lip, eye, or finger tip, they were still there. I recalled hearing once that the chemicals making up my body had been in dinosaurs, the same chemicals reconstituted into one living form after another, again and again over millions of years. Dust to dust. We put the bag on the floor behind the driver's seat to take what was left of Bea and Charlie north to West Davenport, a small town in central New York, a weekend drive with two caskets in the back of the car. Pulling out of the driveway, I remembered the television images of the funeral procession after Kennedy was assassinated: the horse drawn casket heading down Pennsylvania Avenue, the trumpet solo ending with a broken note. We drove north over the Throgs Neck Bridge and up the Thruway.

We met with the monument cutter, a stooped old man in his mid-eighties walking with a cane, who would carve the headstone. When he saw Bea's maiden name, he took a breath, raising his fingertips to his lips. "Oh, my, I used to draw milk from the Rathbun farm in the early 1950s. I believe I knew these girls," he said. The next morning at half past eight, we met with the president of the cemetery association before he was to leave for church. We knocked on his door. "Oh, come on in." We stood in the den of his house. He introduced us to his wife. "Oh, let me take that," he said reaching for the shopping bag I was holding. I handed over Bea and Charlie, giving them up, a

wrenching feeling in my stomach. He put the bag on the floor under a side table as we continued to talk. "Oh, I knew Charlie and his brothers, a real nice family. Do anything to help you out. I remember when they came home after the war." I glanced at the shopping bag. "I remember the band they had, the boys playing the instruments and their father—blind, of course—playing the drums. Oh, I went to many dances they played at, surely I did."

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Pat was cleaning out her mother's house and straightening up the yard. The real estate agent had just begun showing the place. After a cold and rainy spring the quick onset of summer heat had surprised everyone. Pat glanced across the street at Jessie's house, the home of a ninety-five-year-old woman and a friend of Bea's for over forty years. Jessie and Bea were card players. They played Kings on the Corners, often twice a day, and over the years Pat sometimes joined in their afternoon card games. Zach even played with them—a young man with these two ancient white-haired women. He called Jessie a cutthroat card player.

Pat heard a tapping on a glass window pane and went across to Jessie's house to see. There was Jessie on the floor, having fallen a couple hours earlier. She had yelled for help but all the windows were closed, even in the heat. She'd been tapping on the window with her cane. Jessie was in terrible pain. Pat called 911. Within minutes a fire truck arrived and then an ambulance. Four men carefully put Jessie on a stretcher as she cried out in pain. You could tell something was very wrong with her left leg; her foot just flopped to one side as they laid her on the stretcher. Pat went in the ambulance to the hospital with her, and they rolled Jessie into the same room in the emergency suite where, five weeks earlier, Pat had found her mother. As Pat sat at her side, Jessie looked up at her out of only one eye, just like Bea. She apologized to Pat for screaming because of the pain. "I tried to be quiet, but I just couldn't." She had a broken hip, what Pat had always feared with her mother. Pat stayed with Jessie at the hospital until ten that night. They planned surgery for the next day. Jessie didn't want the surgery; she didn't want the nursing home; she didn't want the pneumonia. When she heard about the surgery, she just shook her head from side to side. Looking away she said, "I think I'll go visit Bea." The next day, as they gave her a spinal in preparation for surgery, Jessie's heart stopped dead.

Having been listed as next of kin, Pat was notified about Jessie's death. The final trip to the hospital that Pat had planned for her mother,

she had taken with Jessie. Hearing of Jessie's death, Bea came back to life in her daughter's heart: that empty feeling disappeared. "Don't laugh at me when I tell you that last night I felt Ma. She was with me for the first time since she'd died," Pat said. The anger she felt toward her mother had melted away. "And Nonnie called this morning. She said she had the strangest dream last night. It was opening night of her performance of *Oliver* at West Lake Middle School, and there was Ma waving her hand, dancing across the stage." Bea's painful isolation of walking the floor alone had been transformed into a playful dance in which Pat and her mother were rejoined together through a wave, a wave goodbye.

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Modern Psychoanalysis
Vol. XXIX, No. 1, 2004