

Gone Quietly

Paula Jean Beirman

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Stevensville, Montana

My youngest sister called me from Montana on a Saturday afternoon and said, “David this is the call I have been dreading.” I hung up and sobbed while my wife hugged me. The next afternoon my wife and I were on a plane going north.

Writer Ivan Doig’s mother died on his sixth birthday. Mine just before my 56th birthday. I imagine that it was brutal for a six year old to lose his mother. I need no imagination to know it is brutal for a 56 year old to lose his. Pain, loss, sadness, and loneliness ambush me intermittently. I try to get alone. I am ashamed for people to hear me.

My mother was “physician averse.” Between the birth of her last child in 1961 and her hospitalization for severe pneumonia in 2006 she did not, to anyone’s knowledge, see a doctor. Forty five years of avoiding check ups and smoking in the bathroom. (We are a family expert in secrets. No one was supposed to know.) The outcomes of these two habits were high blood pressure and a massive heart aneurism—a huge, weak bubble in her artery. The doctor said it all could have been averted with blood pressure medication. He said no one would operate on her given the vicious complications of general anesthesia on advancing Alzheimer’s. In his pain my Dad was angry.

Mom’s mom had lived to be 96 but my mom would get no where near that. The doctor told Dad she would not live out the year. She lived two. He said the aneurism would either burst or the heart, working doubly hard, would simply give out. The aneurism did not burst. The heart finally did give out.

We landed late Sunday night and walked into Mom’s darkened room at 1 AM Monday. She had left this nursing home only a handful of times since her pneumonia two years earlier. The rest of the family was already there. Hugs. Tears. Awkwardness. Disbelief. To me it was numbness and surreality like dreaming about a dream.

I stood at the foot of the bed and looked at a near-dead woman like you look at someone you know you should know or someone you know you did know at one time. The beauty of a woman who had been homecoming queen had given way in six quick decades to a gaping mouth, ashen face, and thinned white hair.

Mom was already unconscious and lying on her back unmoving. An oxygen tube in her nose, she had not eaten or drunk for three days now. Her breathing was so shallow I did not know how she could yet be alive. Surface breaths that barely made her chest move and later became so slight that they did not make her chest rise.

The rest of the family was exhausted from the vigil that they had been keeping and I was left to sit with Mom this full night. Alone with this woman who had given birth to me, nursed me, diapered me, spanked me, loved me, sacrificed for me, taught me, scolded me, teased me, and cried when I drove away to college.

I held her limp hand, prayed for her, talked to her, sang to her, read the Bible to her, and watched with high diligence to see that her shallow breaths were still coming. Watched as if I could actually do something to make those breaths stronger or to make them start again if they stopped. Watched with a diligence that becomes the preciousness of this woman—the high value of this life that was a given to me. I have attended maybe 50 funerals and everyone eulogies their mom in exaggerated terms just because moms naturally burrow deeply into our souls and psyches. I am guilty of some of that. Beyond these exaggerations I also know her to have been a woman of unusual generosity, kindness, and sacrifice.

One time, about 4 in the morning, she opened her eyes and looked straight into my eyes. I told her I loved her and told her to keep trusting God and told her I was there. Her eyes closed again. They had seemed vacant when open and yet she had looked right into my eyes. There had to be some lucidity, some consciousness, and some recognition in her. There just had to be some. Even just a little spark. I hold on in grief to the belief that there was really my Mom there—the diligent, sacrificial, smart woman before the final headlong fall—that she looked at me in love and affirmation and in acknowledgement that I was there and was trying to help her. That she told her son with that few seconds of eye contact that she loved him.

The next day the hospice nurse told us that the last thing a person loses when they are dying is their hearing. She told us to keep talking to Mom and to touch her and to be careful what we said while in her presence. Even a little complaint about not getting a birthday gift some year might be heard by our expiring mother. We talked.

In the morning the family was back and we bounced in and out of the room and across to the Stevi Café for breakfast and back to the room and down to the couch for a nap and back and out for a lunch run and on through the day. Mom held on—steady, unmoving, and unchanged. The rest of us ricocheted around the building in thinly veiled anxiety and sadness.

The nursing home administrator had Mom moved to a private room so we could be alone with her and so her roommate, with whom Mom had lived for only 7 days, could have some relief from the parade of family members.

At noon we brought in lunch and the entire family had a picnic in Mom's room, around Mom's bed. We naturally fell into "grieving work." We talked about Mom, fun times, family lore, laughed, sniffled, ate, and joked. It was our last meal with Mom.

Toward the night Mom got agitated. The hospice nurse said she must be in pain and gave her a drop of something under her tongue. Mom quieted down. Her breathing got shallower—a fact I felt impossible. How could it be shallower than it was and still be?

For supper we all left to a restaurant and left Dad there holding her hand and looking at her. When we came back more than an hour later he had not moved. It was his last time alone with a woman to whom he had been married for 57 years. A counselor once told me that losing a person after 57 years was like losing an arm—too monumental to ever move past. My Dad is not an emotionally demonstrative man but he was clearly lost in a sea of pain as he sat there with his failing wife.

At 10 PM I was standing at Mom's head with my hands on her head and believed that she would die just then. She did not. The nearly imperceptible breathing continued all night. The breaths got further and further apart. Fifty times we decided she was gone. But then another miniature breath. I napped on the couch in the lobby. We went in and out.

At 4 AM my sister had to take Dad home to take the blood pressure medicine he had forgotten to bring. I napped again. After 5 AM my wife woke me sharply and said it was time. Looking back I don't know why I ever left the room because there was something in me that wanted to be there the very instant she died. I ran into the room. Somehow I felt that if I were right there her transition would be better and my life would have her blessing as she left.

My brother, my sister, my sister, my wife, and I. We watched as Mom took a last quiet breath. Then no more. Quiet as that. No jerking or convulsing or fight. Breath, then no breath. Just still.

“That's it,” my brother said. We in stunned silence. Waves of grief. Tears. Hugging. I tilted my head back and looked upward for some sense of normalcy and grounding and help. I was nearly 56 before I lost any person close to me and this was not a place I knew how to be.

Her last breath came at 5:19 AM—I marked it on my watch. The nurse came in and wrote 5:25 AM on her note pad. The death certificate read, “June 24, 2008. 5:25 AM. Congestive heart failure and renal failure.”

Dad was not there and I was glad of that. He was already a lost soul and I did not want him to see that final breath and the new stillness that followed and the draining color of the woman, who had eloped with him 57 years earlier, had borne his children, had loved him well, and stayed with him despite his bigger-than-life personality and terrific willfulness.

We called home to tell Dad and my sister. We stayed with her body for awhile. It seemed that if we left the room we were forfeiting this precious woman to death and that somehow if we stayed in the room the fight was not over. Of course we were wrong.

Quickly her body began to turn fully ashen. Quickly she looked like a corpse and not like our Mom. We left the room and the funeral home was called. About an hour later I went back into the room and they were just moving her body onto a stretcher. From behind the curtain all I saw was her bare feet. They were dead. What a strange picture to be registered in my mind, starkly and clearly and absolutely retrievably, of my mother's dead feet.

The days that followed were a blur. Too many details to cover and too many to recount. Our parents had made virtually no preparations. The five of us siblings and various spouses dove in to the sea of work and logistics. After the interment and the memorial and the company were gone I stayed to give some help to Dad. I think it helped a little. On my way to the airport three weeks later I stopped at her grave. I stood in brilliant morning sun and looked at the fresh earth and in that moment experienced the loneliest moment of my entire life.

Good bye Mom. Thanks for looking at me that night before you died. I love you. David