



The Going Away Party

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It was going to be quite a party and not what they expected. Three generations spanning 70 years filled the room. As I watched her greet each arrival, I figured she had planned this event carefully. There were no written invitations and she had fretted, “I need them all here. Maybe the kids won’t come.” Just the day before, she had looked at the ceiling rolling her eyes and prayed, “Lord, don’t let them stay home out of pride or righteousness. Those fool emotions split this family years ago.” She hoped she could rouse the curiosity of even the most stubborn of her children. And here they all were, her husband, brother, and sister, and all five of her children, their spouses, partners, and children, 19 in all.

For 3 years she had avoided this decision, believing it was morally wrong. And she had wanted to live for her husband and her children. “How can I leave James after 40 years? How will he live without me?” she would repeatedly ask me. She worried too that only she could convince her children to get over their ridiculous feud. She could not untangle these thoughts, even when her diabetes worsened and she started dialysis, even when her husband could no longer care for her at home.

She agreed to move to the nursing home 6 months before, not wanting to ruin her husband’s fragile health after his recent heart attack.

Reluctantly she conceded that the move was best and that she could probably do what she needed for her family from there. She did want to live. Just as desperately, she did not want to die, no matter that she could hardly eat and now received most of her nutrition from a feeding tube to her small intestine. “I need to live,” she told me. “Who else can nurture this unruly family back to health?”

Within weeks of moving to the nursing home, she called in tears. “This is not my home. I want to be with James.” The staff said that when she was not crying, she was sitting slumped in her chair, eyes half shut, staring at the floor. Never, even when she was most ill, had she been depressed. In the past, we doctors once had confused her kerchiefed head, drooped lip, and flat monosyllabic responses for depression, but she would remind us that if we had the nausea she had at those times, our collective lips would be curled too, and we might also appear sullen and downcast. Each time, once the nausea receded, it was obvious that her mood swing was nothing more than a manifestation of her gastroparesis. No, this was different. She was living in a shared room with a stranger who was near death. “I can’t stay here,” she said during one visit. She agreed to counseling and antidepressants, and they helped some, but really what she realized was that this was not living.

She called me with chest pain and was admitted to the hospital. That was OK with her. She liked the hospital staff, and it was easier for her husband to visit her there. Her dialysis was provided without a painful ride from the nursing home to the kidney center. “Can I just stay here?” she asked, knowing it would only be for 2 days.

Back at the nursing home, she talked about the reasons she was alive. “I should have died 10 years ago when my diabetes got so bad, and I had the vomiting spells. So why didn’t I?” What was keeping her? Slowly she worked her way through her confusion. She adored her husband, and he was always caring for her, doing the shopping and cleaning and getting to doctors’ appointments. And then there were the kids. She reasoned that with her always being sad that they would not come together, at least they felt guilty for their foolish argument. Wouldn’t they keep their grudges forever if she died? These were compelling reasons to live, until she realized one day, sitting in her nursing home bed, that she could not tolerate the sense of powerlessness any longer. “Everything is decided for me. I used to be in charge. What happened?” With all of her strength and

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no small amount of cunning, she doggedly set about the preparations.

She called her minister. He had reassured her that choosing to stop dialysis was not a sin. She had a hard time being sure about this, but after a while she came to accept what he said. Her husband reassured her that he would continue to live as long as life was there for him. "At least my dying won't kill him," she told me.

Getting back to the hospital was easy. Chest pain worked again like a charm. Once there, she told me she was taking charge. She called her family and there they were, all together from her invitation. "Why did

I wait so long?" she later wondered. Maybe that is all it would have taken: ignoring the rift and inviting anyway. "Nevertheless," she said, "There is no point in regrets."

When she told them that she would no longer receive dialysis, there were exclamations of various sorts, and a few protests of "You can't just quit like that." Then the room became quiet. Sitting tall with James' hand in hers and no longer bowing to her children's feuds or her advancing illness, she watched the unfolding scene: baby grandson on her daughter's knee bouncing to the silent tempo of embraces between her adult children who had

not spoken to each other for years, young children hugging legs with their uncanny understanding, and elders' broad teary smiles that read her heart. The party lasted for days. She quietly faded while her children, grandchildren, siblings, and spouse stayed near, stayed together, and picked up the family fabric begun with her courage and wove it tighter with the healing threads of their stories, laughter, tears, and memories.

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