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Quiet comfort: The night I sat with Samantha

BY ANDREW HIDAS

Sometimes, hospice work requires nothing more than your next breath.

All my adult life I'd wanted to be a Hospice volunteer. I'd imagined sitting in darkened wintry rooms, the twilight grudgingly letting go the day as I engaged my wizened patient in long searching conversations about the meaning of life, and of death.

A year and a half ago, firmly situated in middle age, I decided to move beyond youthful imaginings. With a day job in the perpetually sunny climes of advertising (More! Better! Best ever!), the time seemed right to give some of myself over to the twilight questions if they would have me. So I took the Home Hospice volunteer training, got assigned to my first patient, and it turned out pretty much as I'd imagined.

Anna was 52, well-read, irreverent, and bald from radiation she'd endured for a bad case of metastatic stomach cancer.

Illness had swelled her one-time dancer's legs to grotesque, elephantine posts. She lived in her bathrobe in a filthy house she shared with three cats and piles of trash she couldn't pick up because her cancer precluded any bending over.

I'd visit once a week and scoop up mounds of discarded tissues and TV dinner tins and cat dung before carving out a spot on the couch so we could visit.

Anna mused a lot about coming back as an animal to let her friends know she'd made it over to the other side. Look for an orange cat jumping in front of you when you least expect it, she'd tell them. That'll be me.

Relating this during one of our visits, she chortled smugly, turning the image over in her mind before turning serious again.

What do you think happens after we die? she asked, suddenly agitated.

I really don't know, I replied, shaking my head slowly. I offered a wan smile. I used to have lots of ideas about that, but I don't anymore.

What if it's going nowhere and it's all been a waste?

Judging from the tales you've told, your life's been anything but a waste, I said, giving her a wink. A wicked smile spread across her face.

Anna had lived voraciously, with scores of business successes (and failures), an appetite for food and the arts, and lovers around the world. She directed me to photos on the wall showing her as a gorgeous blond in short skirts, tramping around New York, Paris, Cairo. But she'd never married. Life went too fast, she'd waited too long on the wrong guys, and suddenly she found herself dying barely past 50, her hair and her lovers long gone, an ancient cat kneading the ragged blanket at her feet.

Though Anna feared she'd spent her life running a step and a half to the rear of true happiness, she'd at least maintained a hell of a sprint down its byways. She was still trying to put a multi-party business deal together barely a week before her death.

I shared much of Anna's half hopeful, half fatalistic view of life. She had an engaging cocksureness tempered by bouts of melancholy. She'd spent years in my business, had even, at one time, sent me a resume asking for contract work. By the time I discovered this while routinely cleaning out some files, she was in her final days and could barely talk.

Guess what I found yesterday, I said, leaning close over her bed on my next visit. A resume you sent me almost exactly a year ago.

Arching a brow, she tilted her mouth toward my ear and croaked, Must have been desperate.

I felt like weeping for the courage it took her to be so achingly funny amidst her pain. And for the missed opportunity to have known her when she was well.

I loved Anna for her humor and intelligence, as well as her fear. She told me our friendship, short as it was, had made a difference for her. Hospice work was fulfilling my fondest hopes.

After a few weeks' hiatus, I was assigned my second patient, and any hopes about repeating the easy rapport and deep conversations I'd enjoyed with Anna were dashed on my first visit.

Samantha was 67 and slowly suffocating from emphysema. She'd moved into her daughter's house when she could no longer live independently.

Samantha didn't have much to say. She skimmed over just the barest of her history on our first visit before running out of air and the energy to process any. There were no references to books or music. No Anna-style discussions about opera, the after-life, and the outrage of an early demise. Samantha's eyes were long since dulled from pain and the drugs used to control it. It quickly became evident my job

was to offer respite for her exhausted daughter rather than company for Samantha.

One evening I did my usual check-in with Samantha before she said she was tired and I retreated to the living room to read.

A few minutes later, she called my name. She wanted her blankets pulled up more snugly toward her shoulders. Barely settled back in the living room again, I heard her faint call. A glass of water.

The third time she called out, I realized she didn't need blankets, or water, or for me to ask questions, comment on the things in her room or the angels in heaven. But she did need my presence.

She was propped in a corner easy chair, her spindly legs on an ottoman, oxygen tank humming nearby, her breath coming like the shallow haggard pant of a dog on a summer afternoon.

The blinds were drawn, a dim light burned in the corner, there was no television or radio, and I didn't think it seemed to go back to the living room to retrieve my book. So I sat down on her bed—the only available option—with a deep sense of foreboding. There were three and a half hours of my visit still to go, and I couldn't conceive how it could pass with this dying old woman and her oxygen tank providing the only sight and sound.

Most religious traditions stress the importance of breath, of presence, of surrendering and immersing completely in the moment. Wherever that moment takes place. I've tried a bit of meditating in my life, even offered up implorations and praise. But never had I sat with the sense of equanimity that offered itself to me the night I sat with Samantha.

We just breathed together. Every now and again,



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I'd look over and her eyelids would be half drooped, almost ready to fall into the release of sleep.

Then another weak but urgent cough would cause her to hold a hankie to her mouth and expel what she could from her beleaguered lungs.

I'd just return to our breathing, the minutes becoming hours, quiet-Samantha-without-much-to-say resting with the silent if joyless comfort of my presence in her room. Sometime during this night that passed for me with the swiftness of a feather afloat downstream, I realized I was as close to pure prayer as I've ever been—or am likely to be again.

A few minutes after 10 p.m., I heard the automatic garage door swing open. Samantha's daughter entered through the living room.

How were things tonight? she asked brightly.

Quiet, I said. Nice and quiet.

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