Two Diary Entries: The Machine and Mother

Christine Vandervort
Tuesday ... Now something new has been added to Mother’s environment. A low, constant, groaning murr murr—the motor of her oxygen machine. Up and down, up and down; her chest goes up and down in rhythmic beat with the murr murr of the machine. I hear the tympani of her labored breaths—hoo huh. . . hoo huh. . . hoo huh, accented by an occasional low-toned moan from the depths of Mother’s throat.

Twelve hours ago I was with Mother in the hospital where she had spent a full week, with pneumonia. She had suffered with high fevers and the pain of being moved, and has now had no solid food or drink of any kind for almost four weeks. She is starving to death. She has had Alzheimer’s disease for about three years.

Like Thomas Hardy’s Tess in Tess of the D’Urbervilles, I look down the road, and up the road. I look at where my family and I have been with Mother, and I look where we might be going with Mother. Like Tess, I am afraid to look ahead at what is “in the vale”. The certainties of life both allude us and crash down upon our senses at the same time. Mother is dying; that is certain. When she will die is allusive.

Mother and I had a slumber party last night, in Room 268 South in the hospital. We sang (I sang). We laughed. We visited; we gabbed. (Mother is completely nonverbal now). I teased her about going shopping. I said, “Do you want to go to Hills?” She seemed to let me know, “Yes.” She loved to spend her time shopping. We shopped together many hours.

Last night the doctor prepared us to move Mother to the hospice unit; but, circumstances prevailed in which Mother will be returning to the nursing home instead, where she had been living for the past eighteen months. Since the doctor is uncertain how long Mother will live in her present condition, he is unable to qualify her for the hospice unit. For acceptance into the hospice unit he needs to be able to say that she has only two to five days left. He cannot be certain what her longevity will be—her vital signs are all strong. Her heart is strong, her will to continue is strong.

I suppose she will die, but she will die when she dies; and no one can accurately predict the moment.

Later on Tuesday ... The murr murr of the machine drones on. We drone on. Mother drones on. Pop has decided he wants to stay here next to Mother overnight; but, since he’s been at her side for twelve hours already, I was able to persuade him to allow someone else to pull the night shift. My daughter, who is in from out of state, has volunteered to stay all night with her Grandmother.

My husband also agreed to finally go home and go to bed. He’ll begin the early morning shift tomorrow. I’ll stay here with Pop until about 10:30 p.m. Then, we’ll go home and try to find a normal night’s sleep.

Pop is so afraid Mother will go when he is not with her. I don’t blame him for the way he feels. Having spent sixty-five years of every day of your life with someone tends to breed that kind of bond. Pop and Mother were married in 1938, sixty-one years ago. Sixty-one years. Just a couple of world wars ago is all. Just seven decades is all.

Here we are, Mother, Pop, and I ... and the murr murr. . . murr murr. . . of her oxygen machine, and the hoo huh. . . hoo huh. . . hoo huh. . . of Mother’s breathing.

Pop doesn’t understand why he can’t give Mother a drink of water, or a drink of juice, or even a cookie. Mother is in such danger of choking, or aspirating, she cannot be
administered anything by mouth.
His face is so sad. His face is drenched with sorrow. His face holds such tired-
ness.
The two of them are sleeping next to each other in the room here at the nursing home.
It is very peaceful here; it is very quiet here.
There are no sounds except for the murr murr, and the hoo huh, and the distant throat-
ed moan of Mother’s last sounds.