

Lessons in Death

Annie Krug, 2005

"Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh."

—George Bernard Shaw

This all started with Allen. My mother had lived with Allen, her boyfriend, for over seven years and had taken care of him during that time. With those doe eyes of hers and that never-hurried walk, she would trek all day from kitchen to bedroom, where he lay, bringing him dishes as though he were Sultan. And, I suppose, in her eyes he was. On my visits, I would lean in the door frame, still wearing my too-high heels, and watch his eyes as she approached the bed with her latest offering. His eyes told me that he loved her. And I loved him for that. Not only because he knew a good woman when he saw her, but also because my mother needed his love. And he was not stingy with it.

"He is not a well man," my mother would say, and it struck me how gently she could treat death. Allen had always been what my mother called "a time bomb." But, of course, no one is ever ready for a time bomb to go off. No one is ready for those late-night phone calls, those days that seem too sunny and bright and tend to drag out until you are painfully aware of every detail.

Allen entered ICU at the odd hours of most ICU patient entrances. My mother stood in the ICU waiting room with a childlike look and an oversized purse hanging at her side. I watched her and wished that, at 27 years old, I could have the presence of mind to do something—anything—for her. But all I wanted to do was run. I stood there with my high heels and my grown-up bag and I wished that my mother was invincible again. But here she stood, quite a few inches shorter than me, and her eyes told me that she had left me for one of the few moments in both of our lives. And it scared me.

My Uncle Ray and Aunt Debbie showed up later (when normal people's mornings started, not ICU patients or the ones who follow them into the abyss). Uncle Ray was having his usual cigar and Aunt Debbie was nagging him about it (another usual). "When are you gonna quit those things? I can't stand the smell, and it makes you all wrinkled," she said, flinging her gold flip-flops while crossing her legs. I shrugged my shoulders and wished to God that someone else would enter the waiting room so that I wouldn't be their sole audience.

Well, don't they always say, 'Be careful what you wish for?' Enter more of my family, stage left, to converge on the unsuspecting waiting room victims. The others in the waiting room—a Hispanic family and a middle-aged couple—were a sad match for my boisterous Italian-Lebanese family members. Uncle Gabe came and there were rumors that his estranged (and soon-to-be) ex-wife (my Aunt Mary, for most of my life anyway) was going to visit around the same time. It was the usual family drama, and the ICU waiting room was as good as Caesar's Palace.

She did come, my Aunt Mary. She showed up flashing her 60+ year old gams and overaccentuating her famous Alabama drawl (even though she's been out of the South for over 40 years). "Hi all!" What do you do when a woman like that—a woman who has been

bred to light up a room even on the most awkward occasions—flashes you a smile? Well, I'll tell you: you smile back. And you're also quite a bit thankful, given the circumstances.

"Annie, have you lost weight?" Always a welcome question. At this point, my aunts and uncles (because by now the gang was all here) fell back into the old habit of visiting. I'm surprised someone didn't break out a bowl of hummus, and my uncles didn't start comparing wristwatches. But, of course, this wasn't a social event. Though, like most family gatherings, it had "scandal" written all over it.

We weren't disappointed: it came when my Aunt Mary entered the ICU and went Allen's bedside, where Allen was (hopefully, for his sake) unconscious at this point. I wasn't there, but apparently Aunt Mary caused quite a stir when she "joked" that he had better get well because he still owed her \$20,000 on the loan he had used to open his store. As I said, I wasn't there, but I'm sure those ICU nurses are still going through post-traumatic stress treatments from witnessing this scene and the ripple effect it caused on my other family members.

Truthfully, I myself welcomed a little scandal. Why not? We all knew it was inevitable, and besides, I find TV boring and I had already read all the magazines in the waiting room. And also something else. I was sick to my stomach trying to think of words to soothe my tired mother's heart. I think we all welcomed a bit of vaudeville in that Puritan land of the ICU.

Well, dear reader, after four days in the ICU, Allen did die. He died before anyone could make any decision on what to do about him. We packed up our pillows and water bottles and with tired eyes and somewhat relieved hearts, we found our cars in the concrete parking structure and headed home. On our way, we stopped at the market and bought some salami, cheese, and wine. We got home around 9 at night and we toasted Allen's life. My mother laughed and cried and wouldn't let me hug her. I escaped to the driveway, the only one dry-eyed up until this point, and called my best friend, Tanya. With a heavy head and helpless hands, my voice shook and then I was crying as she told me that this next few weeks would be the hardest, then would get better.

Later that night, my family left, two by two like animals into the ark, each one whispering to me as they passed "Your mother's strong." And I fought the overwhelming urge to shake each and every one of them. She *is* strong, but she's also human, I wanted to tell them. And I know my mother's brand of "strong." It's the one I myself have inherited, and so I know how destructible it is.

Well, both my Aunt Sonia and I converged on my mother, suffocating her with our care. We had each individually come to the decision to stay with my mom at her house for a month, and be with her during this hard time. Of course, my mother was happy to have us, though I still don't completely comprehend how patient my mom could be with two very idiosyncratic women.

The first night we were to spend there (oh, did I mention that my aunt and I were to share the spare bedroom with a daybed and a trundle?) my Aunt Sonia received a call from her boyfriend, Georges (with a silent 's'), and was talking in hushed tones, pacing the living room. I shrugged my shoulders, and turned the TV on, trying not to listen to their conversation. Suddenly, stopping in her tracks, I hear my aunt say, "We're still talking—okay," and then turn the phone off. She shoots me a look that I have been familiar with my whole life, and I already know what's coming. "Your mother," she says. This is a complete sentence to me, because what it means is my mom has done something to piss her off. But

what's new? They're always pissing each other off; it's the flip side of loving someone so intensely.

The next thing I know, she tears off to the spare bedroom where I hear her humidifier blaring for a split second as she opens and closes the door. I sigh. Great. I was gonna go to bed early tonight, I think. No chance of that, so I decide to go see my mom and find out what happened.

I find my mother in her bedroom, or what I like to call "the tundra" because she always has at least three fans blaring (no joke) and sometimes even the A/C. And this is not just in summer—we're talking all year round. I pull my sweatshirt around me as I enter, and meet eyes with my mother. Immediately, she starts to laugh, and I join her. I climb into bed and under the covers (my survival mode against hypothermia has kicked in) and say "I'm not going in there." She laughs harder, and tells me what had happened. She had gotten on the phone when "your Aunt Sonia was on one of her phone calls" to interrupt and say that she was waiting for a phone call. I guess at this point, comforting my mom had stopped and been replaced by good old sibling rivalry. That's okay, I don't think my mom is one to be coddled anyhow. I can't say I blame her.

The next morning, while my aunt was packing, I helped my mom change her bedsheets. Staring at my mother as we both shook the sheet out and parachuted it down to the bed, I finally broke the spell of silence. "You know, I can cancel my trip. It's not a big deal. I don't want to leave you—."

"No." This with a definitive silence resonating afterwards. I shut up, because I learned at a young age that my mother means what she says when she says it. Then, after a pause: "I want you to go."

"But Mom." I start to tear up, and even though she's fitting a pillow into a pillowcase and not looking at me, I know she knows it. She's known it was coming before even I myself did.

"Annie," she starts, "you have to live in the moment. You have to see life as one big adventure." I can't believe it, but more tears are coming and I feel so stupid. I can't believe that she's giving me life lessons and I'm an emotional pincushion. I mean, who should be consoling whom here? But that's the beauty of mothers: they put their pain aside in order to help their children.

"I know, Mom," I say incoherently, the tears undammed at this point. "I'm trying." She is hugging me, and I feel better, though I'm still scared to leave her. I still never completely know what's going on behind those deep brown eyes of hers.