

Do Not Go Gentle

A Hotel Elevator

A blanket of El Niño snow had quietly descended upon the city. For once, we would celebrate a white Christmas. My in-laws were in town for the holidays, and I was grateful to be on call.

I can only tolerate my mother-in-law for brief periods of time. She raised two wonderful children, but since they left the nest, it seems to me that she feels entitled to a life of leisure and lethargy. Although I enjoy the gourmet dinners she serves—my mother-in-law is an excellent cook—I feel she wastes most of her time watching television. Through a steady diet of popular culture and current events, she has amassed a great knowledge of trivia. She never loses at Jeopardy, and few activities give her more pleasure than defeating her physician son-in-law at games of knowledge.

The Christmas that she came to town, she was only 56 years old, but years of heavy smoking, overeating, and inactivity had taken their toll. She regularly ended the day passed out in her chair in front of the television after a bottle of wine or a slew of Manhattans. Warning her about health risks was no use.

I had not been surprised when she was diagnosed with cancer two years before Christmas, nor had I been shocked by her long delay in seeking treatment. She bravely endured a right mastectomy followed by chemotherapy and radiation. She had extensive local disease and numerous positive lymph nodes but now she was tumor free. I was not optimistic for a cure but felt a prolonged remission was not unreasonable.

Unfortunately, she held firm to the cloak of the victim and refused to take care of herself. Soon after her remission, she ballooned up to 200 lbs. She was out of breath after one flight of stairs yet refused to give up her cigarettes. My father-in-law, the true martyr, waited on her every wish. He was over 70 years old and still working full-time in order to maintain the lifestyle to which she had become accustomed.

These were the in-laws I welcomed to town that Christmas. My beeper had been ominously quiet all day, so I had no means of escape. For dinner, my wife had prepared good old hot browns with salted Kentucky ham, and the meal was sitting heavy. After dinner, we drove through the snow-covered streets to their hotel. We dropped off the women at the door, then parked the car. On the way in, my wife pelted us with snowballs that my father-in-law was quick to return. We crossed

the lobby and caught up with my mother-in-law. As she stepped onto the elevator, suddenly she fell to the ground. Thinking she had tripped, I rolled her over and knelt by her side. A terrible gasp of air exited her lungs and I could see the light dying in her eyes.

She had no pulse. "Call 911!" I shouted up at the growing crowd of on-lookers. "Does anyone know CPR?" I asked. Blank stares met my query. A maintenance man came to shut down the elevator because the doors kept trying to close on my mother-in-law's outstretched legs.

"It's OK," my father-in-law told the crowd. "He's a doctor . . . he knows what to do." His voice was trembling with fear. My wife had vanished behind a flurry of tears.

Lost in a surreal fog, I started cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Moments later, a second rescuer arrived, to my infinite relief. Buttons flew as he ripped open her sweater and resumed chest compressions. I chose the unenviable job of delivering respirations mouth-to-mouth.

Within 15 minutes, the first response team arrived with an automated external defibrillator and shocked her out of ventricular fibrillation. Her eyes blinked into consciousness and she squeezed my hand.

"What happened?" she asked, bewildered. I tried to explain how her heart had stopped beating and that we had to revive her. "But I feel fine . . ." she pleaded in disbelief. "Agh! Look what you did to my sweater!"

As she recuperated from her heart bypass, we spoke about that evening. "All I remember is feeling a little nauseated, then everything went black," she recalled. "There was no pain, no fear . . . but no light either."

"How could you see the light?" I asked proudly, reaching out to touch her hand, "I was standing in the way!" She laughed and looked up to her husband, "You know, Bob? I don't think we bought this kid enough for Christmas."

A few months later, my mother-in-law developed a chest wall recurrence and liver metastasis. She now faces the prolonged agony and relentless onslaught of metastatic breast cancer. I saved her from a quick, painless death. I would not let her go gentle into that good night . . .

—S.W. Gordon, MD
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