

Death Stinks

Feb. 19, 2023

My friend's mom died the other day. Her name was Joyce, and she was my friend, too. I'm a little stunned at how it has affected me... I mean, she was a friend, yet for a few reasons I didn't necessarily expect her death to hit me very hard. For one thing, we hadn't talked very often for awhile, and since our correspondence dwindled to almost nothing over the past few years, 9 times out of 10, her husband Paul would speak to me when I called. Whenever we did speak, though, our conversations were wonderful, full of laughter and her fun, surprising stories about the many interesting things she'd done through her life. Incidentally, Paul is my friend too, and they've both been incredibly kind and welcoming to me over the years, especially when my own parents died. Joyce even once told me, "You're family now, too." I do need to call Paul and offer my condolences, but I dread to do so almost as much as I dread not to... I just don't know what I can possibly say at a time like this, and I'm afraid he'll have the same problem but probably even worse. It's really tough, this death thing; I'm beginning to think we should all just stop doing it.

Joyce had cancer, advanced melanoma, but that's not what killed her. One of the treatments they gave her, Keytruda, had some terrible side effects, and it seems she ultimately died of those complications. More accurately, she died after refusing to endure the pain of trying to fight through those complications any longer. The strangest part about all of this, for me, is how utterly healthy she had seemed just before they discovered the spot on her lower back. So vibrant. Only a few months ago, no one even knew there was a deadly tumor growing on her skin and spreading through her system, and when we'd talk on the phone I sort of had the impression she might live forever, seemingly so full of life and positive energy. Then in rapid succession came the biopsy, then the diagnosis, then the treatment... and I don't think I ever spoke with her again, actually. Not after the worries began. It all happened so suddenly, like a car screeching to a halt from 100 mph to zero in a short distance, all squealing tires and braced arms and stiff legs... then just eerie, uncomfortable quiet. It's not even that she died unexpectedly, as the diagnosis, once it came, was pretty dire. It's just the insanely fast progression of events, the incredible deterioration in so short a time... it's been a bit breathtaking, honestly, perhaps because it's such a stark reminder of how fast everything can change.

In the wake of all this, I can't help but think of my own parents, but especially about my dad. When Mom died, it was pure shock; a meteorite strike, no warning, no process, just here one day and gone the next. But Dad was different. It feels like he spent the last 15 years of his life dying, though instead of a gradual deterioration it was a seemingly endless string of acute events. Heart attacks, specifically. He had his first one around 2002, when I was still in prison, then another before I came home in 2004. The scare was intense but he recovered well. After a few infarction-free years to calm our collective anxiety, he called me one afternoon when I was at school... he was in Las Vegas (where the first one also happened, and maybe even the second); and he told me in an eerily calm voice to not worry, but he was pretty sure he was having another heart attack.

and had like me to drive Mom out there as soon as possible, but not to call and worry her just yet, either. I was on parole at the time and not allowed to travel more than 25 miles, certainly not out of state, so this was a real problem. I couldn't get permission fast enough, so we arranged for my brother to drop Mom off in Las Vegas while I worked out a 24-hour pass with the Parole Officer, meeting up with her just after midnight that night. That was heart attack #3; I lost count completely after #8.

Most of Dad's heart attacks were relatively mild, and some I was there for, some not. At least, he never drew much attention to them, and the whole process actually became so routine that he'd joke about having to go get "rooted" again. I don't know how many he survived before he finally succumbed in 2016, but it was well over ten. No one could say they didn't see the inevitable outcome from miles away, though the sheer COMMONNESS of it over time did provide a false sense of security, too, and I was desperate for security, since Mom was gone by then and I was back in these fucking dungeons again... I needed to feel like Dad (and the rest of the world, for that matter) would endure, unchanged, forever. But of course, nothing ever does; endure, that is.

I feel for my buddy, and for his father too, who like mine is now rudderless and adrift, not really knowing what to do in a world without his soulmate. Time will tell how well either of them, lost father and helpless son, will deal with Joyce's departure, but I greatly hope for the two of them that they find ways to do better than either my dad or I did, since we both basically just crumbled after losing the pillar in our lives that was Mom. I really don't have any profound or insightful way to wrap this up now... I'm pretty much just waiting for the next blow to land, at this point. But then again, there IS a brighter light in my life now, too: my friend Jon, a new father, and the stories he's been sharing with me about that experience. It's the other side of the coin. Lives are ending, but others are just beginning, and in more ways than one. I'll save those thoughts for another time, though.

If you'd like to write
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Mail runs slowly, but I'll
write back!

Also, please leave a comment!

I'll answer all of those too,
but remember, it takes time
for B.t.B. to print and send it to
me, then it takes FOREVER for the
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Expect to see my reply to your
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