

NORMALIZED DEATH

Sue Burke

THERE'S A SINK AND DRINKING GLASSES IN MOM'S ROOM. I know I should take the pills right away before she wakes up. Instead I stand in the doorway and stare.

Mom looks bad. An oxygen tube loops under her nose, and her skin is puffed and grayish-yellow. An adhesive medical patch sends painkillers into her neck. Below the blanket, printed with a nice homey flower pattern, she wears adult diapers. Her body can no longer sustain itself. Time to go. No one argued that at the hospital, no one is arguing that now, not even me.

Death is normal. Normal. No argument there, either. It was time, all of a sudden, for a hospice. Time to say goodbye.

There's no sense making it harder than it has to be. I look at the two sky-blue pills in the blister pack in my hand. *Clearimond*, that's the brand name. "It will clear up your emotions," the counselor said in our session this morning. "It's a very popular choice."

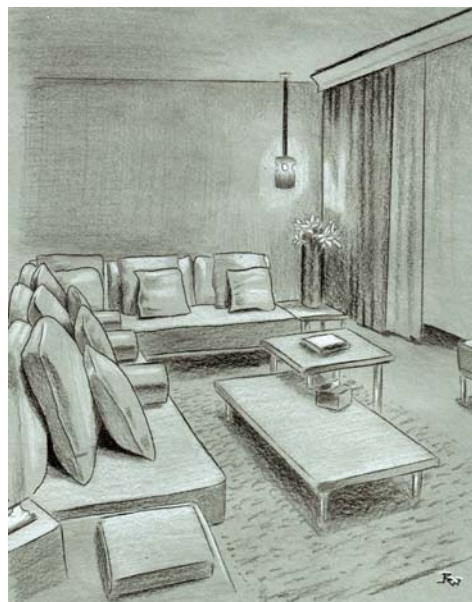
We'll all be happy as Mom slips away. We'll chat pleasantly when she's awake, and we'll enjoy these last precious moments together. We'll have warm memories, and she'll go peacefully because we'll be at peace, too. What more could we want?

I take a few steps into the room. Everyone said the hospice had a wonderful staff and a pleasant, normal setting because death is normal, completely normal. The reception area looks like a living room, with soft green sofas and house plants on the windowsill, decorated with a few small American flags. Tomorrow is the Fourth of July.

Mom is wearing her favorite nightgown, an oversized long brown tee-shirt. On the nightstand next to her bed are photos of us on vacation in front of a huge sequoia, a big waterfall, and the Grand Canyon. She looks the same in all of them, with cropped hair and old blue jeans. At work, she wore a simple pants suit. She always wanted to be genuine. No makeup, no high heels: "just me the way I am."

How does that explain my sister, false right down to the eyelashes? Dad, obviously. He's the one who insisted on that oh-so-cute name, Kimberleen, and eventually he opted for a

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cuter wife. But he's on his way back for the final moment. It would look bad otherwise, and he likes to look good.

My sister has already turned her house into a giant red, white, and blue celebration. I haven't done a thing and I probably won't. Not just because I'm busy with Mom. I never do much for any holiday, like her. I own one pair of high heels, which I've worn three times, and a tube of tinted lip gloss, mostly for the sunscreen in it.

My daughter is on her way back from summer camp. She insisted. "Mom, I have to be there! Don't worry, you don't have to come get me, there's a bus. I can manage." But my husband is picking her up. "There are things a dad has to do," he told her. She couldn't argue with that, and I can't help feeling proud of them for willfully doing something difficult.

Kimberleen insisted that the grandkids should not come, and I thought they should, at least mine, and the counselor worked out a truce with concessions on both sides: they can come if they choose, and we'll all take Clearimond.

"We have to think of Mom," Kimberleen argued. "She's sick enough without being sad. Maybe we could bring one of those old family board games. Trivial Pursuit? Mom was always good at details. It will be our one last chance to have fun with everyone together."

She said it with a smile, a placid smile. She's been on some version of Clearimond for a long, long time now. I've seen her bathroom cabinet. She'll be here soon, happy as confetti. I have to admit that she's more fun to have around than me. And I'm holding happiness right here in my hand. I gave my word that I'd take it.

Mom has to go. It's time. I understand. But I don't have to like it. I sit in the armchair next to the bed and remember her disappointment when Dad left, her help when I was pregnant and had complications, and her smile, a genuine smile, when the birth went fine. And back when I was in fifth grade, when a friend died in a car accident, she didn't try to cheer me up, none of the "she's gone to a better life" or "you still have your other friends" that the other mothers said to their children, she just let me be sad and was somber herself because she, too, had to learn to live in a world where I no longer had that friend.

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with concessions on both sides:
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and we'll all take Clearimond.*

Happiness isn't everything. I slip the pills in my pocket. Maybe I'll take them after she's gone. Maybe.

She stirs in bed. The wrinkled eyelids quiver.

"Hello, Mom," I say. "It's Rebecca. I've come to see you." I hear my voice catch, a glottal stop of grief.

She hears it, too. She looks up toward me, somberly. We both knew this was coming, and though I don't know what we'll say and her voice is barely more than a whisper, we begin to talk. 🚫

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Sue Burke was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and live briefly in Austin, Texas, y'all, before moving to Madrid, Spain, in December 1999. She writes fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and non-poetry in English and occasionally in non-English. Her works have appeared most recently in Space and Time, Atomjack, Desolate Places, and Asimov's. More of her writing is at her website, and her blog, Mount Orégano. She held her father's hand as he died.