

The Road Elsewhere

by Cathy Cameron

My elderly father pulls every article of his clothing out of the closet and piles them, hangers and all, in a precarious pyramid on top of his walker. One by one, t-shirts and sweatpants fall off the heap and drop to the floor. Dad teeters, like a child who has recently learned to ride a two-wheeler, as he clings to his walker for support and tries to pick them up without losing his balance.

He glares back at me. I have refused his request to take him home. He shoots me a look of disappointment that penetrates through my emotional armour. Until now, we have always understood each other, been a team, and yet, here we sit in opposing camps. I am no longer the doting youngest daughter. Instead, I have become the bossy stern parent and it's a change in dynamic that neither of us accept.

Two weeks ago, I got the call that Dad had taken a bad fall on the ice while he was out walking his dog. A neighbour had found him, bloodied, lying motionless, facedown in the snow, with his dog still at his side. A 911 call and an ambulance got him as far as the Emergency Room, but a broken nose, two cracked vertebrae in his neck and his disorientated state were not enough. Hospitals, it seems, are reluctant to admit elderly patients – especially those who have family to care for them.

I book time off work, and a flight from Vancouver to Toronto, to join my siblings who have rallied together to support Dad and attempt to conquer a hospital

admissions process that is more competitive and rigorous than that of an Ivy League school. My sisters, who live in Toronto, persevere. By the time I arrive, Dad has been admitted to St. Michael's Hospital in downtown Toronto. Rather than feeling delight at this victory however, we feel depleted by the process, and wary of what lies ahead.

My dad, on the other hand seems oblivious to the seriousness of his condition and situation. Instead, he soaks up the attention he gets from us all being together; his five children, his stepdaughter, and his second wife. The hospital staff even agree to allow Nelson, his Norwich terrier (and favourite child) to visit him.

Each day, the doctors try to assess the extent that the accident has had on Dad's cognitive capabilities by asking a series of questions; "Can you tell us what time of day it is Allan? What day of the week is it? What is the name of the city are we in?" As an articulate and well-informed man, Dad equivocates like a pro but does not quite land the answers. Having spent the latter part of his career leading negotiations and the labour relations unit at a university, he is well-practiced at not revealing his cards too quickly. Surely, with a bit more time, and encouragement, the words circling at the tip of his tongue will be set free. After the second or third day of a similar line of questioning, Dad waits for the doctors to leave, and exhales in exasperation. "Gee, you would think they could find more stimulating things to talk about, wouldn't you? They are not a remarkably interesting bunch."

Meanwhile, the doctors encourage Dad to get up and walk the hospital corridors. With his two deep purple-black-eyes, and neck halo, my father resembles a hockey player who has spent too much time in the penalty box. He is eager to get back into the game and show that he still has it. Dressed in his hospital attire, he sets the pace at the front, and we all follow in conga line formation behind him, hands ready to catch him if needed. The only thing we are missing is a Cuban musical ensemble to accompany us down the hall. Suddenly, in a spontaneous, “Look Ma, no hands!” moment, Dad lifts both hands from his walker and attempts a little jig. He smirks at us. My sisters gasp. They cannot bear the thought of him incurring more injuries. I, however, cannot help but laugh at the ridiculousness of the scene. His rebellious playfulness, even in these circumstances, makes me smile. With a twinkle in his eye, he laps up the full range of reactions that he elicits, proud that he can still command the attention of the room.

After a week or so on the medical floor, with his physical healing well underway, the staff inform us that Dad is ready to move to a new floor. As we enter the new ward, I notice a small group of patients sitting together in the common room, staring off into space. They’re not interacting. Soft, unrecognizable food served on plastic trays sits untouched in front of them. Other patients wander the halls aimlessly. I bring my hand up to my face to diffuse the stench of urine that penetrates the air. This is where patients are stored until longer-term placements can be found. Only days ago, my father was enjoying the simple comforts of nutritious home cooked meals,

walks with Nelson the wonder dog, doing daily crosswords with Mary and listening to CBC radio by the fire. My heart sinks. We have entered the ward of lost hope.

Although the doctors tell us that my father's swift retreat into oblivion could eventually subside and that he may return close to his pre-accident level of functioning, we know that head injuries are not kind to those in the initial stages of Alzheimer's. Instead of readying ourselves for what we believed would be a slow and steady drive on familiar back roads, its as if life's accelerator has been pushed flat to the floor, giving us whiplash, and launching us for an unexpected ride on the autobahn. I am not ready to lose the charming, lucid version of my father so quickly.

"Watch yourself Dad. That looks unstable," I caution, in response to the clothing construction project underway. I have already tried to convince him that it is important for him to remain in hospital a while longer so he can fully heal. He is having none of it.

My father ignores me as he begins to push his walker, one unsteady step at a time, towards the door. "I'm really disappointed in you Cathy," he says. Even though on a cognitive level I know we are doing the right thing keeping him here, the shame he intends me to feel pulsates in my stomach. Oh, how I wish I could help him hatch an escape plan and return to the comforts of home and his previous life – an idea that, sadly, is beginning to seem further and further out of reach.

"How do you plan to get home?" I ask. The hospital is in downtown Toronto; it is the middle of winter, and my father lives a 35-minute drive north of the city. "I'll

take the subway,” he asserts. I try to imagine him walking down Yonge Street in his neck brace and hospital attire. He would not be able to find his way out of the maze of hospital corridors, let alone the closest subway station. The fact that the subway does not even go to his town is another matter completely.

I do not try to stop him. Instead, I watch him push his caravan of clothing down the hallway towards the large doors at the end of the hospital ward. Tears blur my vision. I know his journey to freedom will come to a sudden end. The locked doors require a code to advance through. A system that even those of us without a brain injury, feel lucky to remember.

As I watch this unfold, I have a momentary flashback: I am a chubby little girl, aged 3 or 4, and am unhappy to have been left at home again, while my three older siblings attend school. I decide to take matters into my own hands, and pack snacks and crayons in my little red schoolbag. I am determined to go to school. I get as far as the end of my driveway but am unsure of what to do next. I kick pebbles with my feet, and I stand there, fidgeting, until it is time to go inside for lunch.

One of the patients down the hall belts out a loud call for help. The reason for the commotion is unclear, but it distracts my father from his quest. His compassion for his new comrade diverts his attention and he forgets his exit plan for now. I heave a sigh of relief.

Over the course of the next week, I visit him daily. I am never certain whether I will be spending time with my father from days gone by, or if I will be witnessing him

slip further away from me. One day, in response to a story about my mother, Dad looks at me blankly. Her name doesn't seem to register. "Her name is Margaret. You were married to her for 30 years and had five children together," I tell him, the words catching in my throat. He listens intently and tries to understand what I am telling him. For a moment, we sit together in silence. A serious look comes across his face. "This sounds very important," he replies. I try to stay strong for him and do manage to hold it together until I walk through the front door at my sister's home. I immediately crumble in tears.

Months later, after my father is transferred to long term care at the Veteran's wing of Sunnybrook Hospital, my mother goes to visit him. She is in town, visiting from Montreal. Although they have not seen a lot of each other in recent years they have always remained on friendly terms after their divorce. As she walks into his room, my father looks up and breaks out the biggest, brightest smile. They sit and hold hands like good old friends.

These moments of recognition and connection become more precious with time. They are especially difficult to maintain living so far away. Eventually, a new job offer in Toronto emerges and I am the one packing my bags to return to live there full time. This allows me to have visits with Dad and the rest of the family more regularly.

Without warning the day comes when the conversations stop altogether. My father is no longer able to express his thoughts vocally and I no longer expect him to return to his old self. We have come to a place where we are happy to simply be together, relishing the silent companionship as we hold hands on this long tough journey to elsewhere.