

My Grandmother's Last Days Were in Our Living Room

The small blessing of quarantine is that we were all together.

By Devi Lockwood

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DURHAM, N.H. — Cannula has to be one of the most beautiful words in the English language — it also represents an object I hate, and lines interrupting a face I know and love. When my grandmother struggled with breathing, I couldn't help but think that this transparent tube was at fault. I should have given the cannula more credit. Its passageway connected to a machine that, as it hummed and whirred, kept her alive.

My grandmother died early Tuesday morning, after declining for weeks. It wasn't the coronavirus, but our response was shaped by it. Hospice facilities across the country are each setting their own policies to prevent the spread of the virus, and at the ones we called near my parents' home in New Hampshire, no one, not even my grandfather, would have been allowed to see her. Zoom and FaceTime visits wouldn't have been enough. So, as I imagine many other families have in recent weeks, we chose to bring her home.

A big truck delivered a hospital bed and an oxygen machine. We transformed our living room into a space for her to pass. My aunt and cousin drove up to visit.

Once a day a nurse came to help. The rest of the time my grandfather, my parents and my siblings and I muddled through it. We rolled her onto one side, then the other, to change her sheets and clothes. We used a green, lollipop-like sponge at the end of a stick to keep her lips and mouth moist. We held her hand. She couldn't speak much. Sometimes she asked what day it was, whether it was morning or evening. We didn't know when the end would come, but we knew that it was on its way.

The nights were the most disorienting. Her breathing, always short and shallow, hit a higher tempo, a lighter pace. Even putting a nightgown over her shoulders exhausted her. We'd turn the oxygen machine up as high as possible, trying to give her some relief. She'd ask me to brush her hair. When my arm tired, hundreds of strokes later, I'd kneel at the end of the bed on wheels, massaging her feet with thick shea butter.

At midnight, she'd notice that I was tired. "Go rest. I love you. Thank you," she'd say.

We woke up each morning and repeated our routine: lift, rinse, sponge, change, roll out a fresh sheet beneath her body, wash and wash and dry. None of us could have done this alone. We fed her soft things, moistened her lips and hoped that the evening wouldn't bring too much pain.

Twenty years ago, when my mom was off climbing mountains in the Himalayas, my grandparents raised me. Over the last few weeks, I thought often about how caring for her was the least I can do to return that favor. All her life she was a giver, a woman confidently in the driver's seat of her own life.

My grandmother opened child care centers in the slice of Connecticut where we once lived, welcoming hundreds of children as if they were her own. She was always on the phone. She loved being in charge. Half of her home was a nursery school, with wooden pigs full of crayons, boxes of cardboard blocks and a gingerbread house under the stairs.

In the backyard, I swung on the swings. I jumped on an old tire. I crawled through a concrete tube. I slid down the slide. We ate ice cream and made brownies and kissed each other good night. I knew that I was loved.

I used to be afraid of the people I love dying. Once, in San Francisco, I met a woman who called herself the midwife of death, a Buddhist chaplain at the Mount Zion Cancer Center. She told me about how, after her mother died, she led her father through a ritual where they washed her body. With each touch, they said goodbye.

“You come to a point in the process where the road forks and you have two choices. You can go, ‘Oh my God, I don’t know how to do this,’ and completely freak out. You could let yourself be guided by fear,” she said.

“Or you can just show up. Just be there. Be there in love. Say: This is a person I loved. Say: I will be present.”

Caring for my grandmother felt not unlike when my siblings were newborns. We are all tired, but fortunate to be so close. My mom would wake up multiple times in the night to check on her breath. We’d change her sheets and rub the lines out of her legs and back when they needed it. In the hours around dawn, one of us would climb into her hospital bed to hold her tightly. This was aging in reverse. My grandmother didn’t cry, though her eyes would look glassy when she’d ask us where she was. She didn’t want to be alone. I was surprised by how calm and natural this all felt. We took care of each other out of instinct.

On Tuesday morning I set an alarm for 3:45 a.m. to take over a night watch from my mom. In the hours since midnight, my grandmother’s breathing had become more and more distant, the spaces between each inhale lengthening. My mom kissed her mother’s forehead, which was starting to get cold. We listened to her breathe. I interlaced my fingers between hers, and fell asleep sitting in a chair. By the time I woke up, she was gone.

The small blessing of quarantine is that we were all at home. We weren’t going anywhere: We couldn’t and we didn’t want to. I brushed her hair, I massaged her feet, I washed her nightgowns and sponged her lips with water. I did my best to keep showing up.

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