



Hospital Drive

Word, Sound, Image

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4 Containments

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Two Bites

We went to eat at a pleasant neo-hippie restaurant in the Midwest for a book club. It was a sunny day and the restaurant had big windows overlooking a great lake. A woman sat next to me on the inside of the leather booth. She said, "I forget things. I can't remember words." She didn't eat more than two bites of her food and was ready to leave before the other book club members. I slid out of the booth and stood to let her leave. When she stood, I hugged her. "You look beautiful," I said. And she did, with a delicate luminescent beauty. "Everyone says I look beautiful," she said, "but I'm losing my memory and I don't know why. There," she added, "I got that out." "I'm so sorry," I said. "At least you look beautiful but I suppose you'd rather have your memory." "Yes," she said.

Counsel

Someone asked how my friend was. I said my friend was dying and in hospice care. That person told someone and that person told someone else and that person told the dying woman's sister, who got mad at me. "You shouldn't have told anyone," the sister said to me. "It will be a nail in my sister's coffin if anyone hears that." Many people think like that. I'm not sure why. I apologized to the sister and said I wouldn't tell anyone else but then I told my boyfriend.

The sister had come to my city to care for her dying sister when she had two weeks to live, but then the dying sister had an operation and it had now been two years.

I know the dying woman and have talked to the sister three times. Each time she was distressed and I tried to help. She told me how hard it was to care for her dying sister. I understood because my sister had died a long, difficult death from a brain tumor. I suggested a support group for the caring sister. When you're the caregiver, you keep repeating your story, hoping something will change in the telling but it doesn't. People to whom you tell the story always suggest what you should do, partly because they want to help and also because the situation is so painful to hear about they want to fix it as soon as possible and get away. This is the reason for support groups. But I didn't go to a support group when my sister was dying and neither did the caring sister. Support groups are a good idea for others, not for us. Telling me about her distress enabled the caring sister to continue looking after her sister but it didn't relieve the distress or anger of being in that situation. Both got worse. She had never been close to her dying sister but she didn't want her to die. The sick sister has lost vision in one eye, gets infections that don't heal, and sleeps a great deal. It's an effort for the caring sister to get her up and down the steep stairs but she's determined to get her sister out once a day. The dying sister has lost her mind and can't walk alone or talk and, could she choose, might not want to live. It's hard to say.

Quitting

A friend from college and I talked recently about our choices in careers, partners, families. She talked about how long she had stayed in a terrible job. It was obvious things weren't changing, she said, why didn't I quit?

Now she has severe multiple sclerosis. Recently, she told me that in Switzerland, they have hotels for people with terminal diseases, with doctors and rooms equipped for suicide. Do you have any problem with that, I asked. Absolutely not, she answered. If you decide to do anything like that, I said, call me so I can come and see you before. If I can't even quit a job, she said, how can I decide that?

Filling Up with Sadness

After my friend's mother died a painful death, my friend went to a grief therapy group. My friend is a social worker who used to run therapy groups herself. "It wasn't how I thought it would be," she said. Each person had told their story, like AA, and each story was long and sad. One woman's ten-year-old child was gunned down, another's father died of a heart attack, a man's wife of fifty years died of MS, for three years a sister was dying from a brain tumor. My friend said, "I got tired and had less and less energy to talk. I wanted to say, divide up the group into different kinds of loss, mothers, fathers, spouses, lovers, children, murdered children." I understood. Loss is specific, territorial, competitive. Feed me, it says, listen to me. Me!

The next week, my friend got some energy back and went to individual therapy. She learned that if you go to a grief group, you shouldn't go right after someone you love has died because you're like a sponge. If you listen to others' sad stories, you can't leave without taking their sadness with you added to the sadness you came in with. The others take your sadness and the sadness they came in with and the total store of sadness in the world increases rather than decreases. Go to individual therapy.

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