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Just Shoot Me

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MY FATHER, AS HE APPROACHES DEATH, NEVER speaks about it, but I know he's thought the matter through and wants to avoid a lingering, painful end. I'm sure of this because of the pills I found in his closet.

I came upon them one morning last week while he was in the shower and I was trying to bring some order to his room. On his closet shelf, just above a row of dress shirts and the soft plaids he now likes to wear, sat a flowered cotton bag. I got it down, opened the drawstring and pulled out one small prescription bottle after another — a dozen, all told. They were all labeled “Nembutal 100 mg 30 cap,” and each carried the same directions: “One capsule by mouth at bedtime as needed for sleep.”

Before helping my dad out of the shower and into his clothes, I ran the bag upstairs and stashed it in my dresser. It's safe there, because he can no longer climb stairs. He also can't fix his own meals or read the paper or dress himself without help. He suffers from both asthma and atrial fibrillation, but his greatest ailment is dementia, probably of the Alzheimer's type. His language, memory, and self-awareness are all vanishing under its relentless assault, which is why I now live with him in his house on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

The one thing he has asked of my brothers and me is not to put him in a nursing home.

The night after I found the pills, I sat down on my bed with its creaking horsehair mattress and spilled the dozen bottles onto the bedspread. The prescriptions had been written between 1997 and 2001 — years when my father was entirely lucid — by three different doctors in two states. I opened each bottle, poured out the small yellow capsules, and counted. Almost every bottle held the full amount.

His plan had been clear to me from the moment I'd found the bottles, but the next day I went on the Internet and looked around to confirm. “Nembutal” is a trade name for pentobarbital, a short-acting barbiturate once commonly prescribed as a sleeping pill. A sedative and hypnotic, the drug is sometimes used for physician-assisted suicide. Marilyn Monroe had Nembutal in her system when she died, and my father, with over three hundred capsules in his possession, had enough to kill an ox.

I also found that they're still potent. I took one of them at bedtime and dropped off in twenty minutes. The next night I took two, and sleep overwhelmed me before I'd read five pages of David Shenk's book on Alzheimer's, *The Forgetting*.

Right-to-die groups advocate Nembutal as an effective and peaceful way to commit suicide. Derek Humphry, the founder of the Hemlock Society, wrote about the drug in his 1991 best-seller *Final Exit*. There's no copy of that book on my father's shelves, but I've seen brochures from the Hemlock Society in his desk, and I know he was once a member. Back in the days when my father spoke openly about such matters, he made it clear that he didn't want to be trapped in a failing body or be a burden on anyone. The pills were obviously intended to be a way out: no pain, no mess, no scandal.

FOR MOST OF MY FATHER'S NINETY-ONE YEARS HIS mind has been clear and focused. At Harvard, Joe Thorndike was managing editor, then president of the *Crimson*, the student newspaper. In 1934 he took a job at *Time* under Henry Luce, and twelve years later, at thirty-three, he became *Life's* third managing editor. He founded a pair of hardcover magazines, *American Heritage* and *Horizon*, edited dozens of books and wrote three himself, the last when he was almost eighty. Yet today, if I leave him unattended, he's apt to emerge from the bathroom with his incontinence underwear pulled up over his pants. Though the lawn has been covered with snow for weeks, he's confused about the season and guesses that this is summer. One night he tells me that we have a visitor, that it's Mitt Romney, and that we have him in the refrigerator.

Over the last six months my father has been losing his nouns. It started with proper nouns: the names of people he's known for fifty years or the name of the street where I grew up. Now his common nouns are also escaping him. He can't come up with the word *plate* or *fish*. Most likely, I think, he has forgotten about the bag of sleeping pills — no matter that several times a day he walks past the open closet where I found them. He certainly hasn't asked me about them. But then, if he were intent on killing himself, I'm sure he wouldn't say a word about it.

I see no signs that he's ready to end his life. He still eats with pleasure, still makes jokes, still shuffles over an icy path with my arm around him to reach a wooden platform above Nauset Beach. From there he stares out in silence over the blue Atlantic, the ocean he has loved since childhood, when his parents rented a summer cottage near Marblehead.

But what if he does want to kill himself, and I have taken his pills? In theory I defend his right to suicide — though I wouldn't want him to get confused, as he often does about his other medications, and wind up swallowing too many Nembutals by accident. It's possible, though, that he would know exactly what he was doing. There's the rub about moving into his house and looking after him: I'm never sure when to let him choose and when to choose for him.

We coerce the elderly as a matter of course: we make them stop driving, we decide what medications they should take, sometimes we put them in homes against their will. And then we tell them, as we decide almost everything about their lives, how they should feel about it: *Cheer up. Don't worry. Just relax.* I haven't put my father in a home, and I haven't insisted that he spend afternoons at the senior center, as many people

have advised me to do, because my dad resists going. Still, his days often go better when I get him out of the house, especially in the late afternoon, the time of day when despair tends to engulf people with dementia. If I can convince him to take a drive down to the harbor or over to Cape Cod Bay, just looking out over the water will lift his spirits.

The next day, however, we're back to the same struggle. He doesn't want to go anywhere or do anything, and once again I try to persuade him. The truth is, starting with my cheerful greeting in the morning, I coerce him all day long: I encourage him to eat and drink. I urge him to do his exercises. I ask him a stream of questions that are essentially manipulative. I'm trying to keep him involved because I'm afraid that, without my steady guidance, he could withdraw from life completely.

IF YOU ASKED MY FATHER HOW MUCH HELP HE wants and how much I should be choosing for him, his answer would be clear: he dislikes being helped, and he wants to make his own decisions. He's an independent and restrained New Englander who accepts my help only because I insist. He'd prefer to be left alone. He'd also prefer not to be touched. When I guide him into the shower or offer my arm to him as we emerge from the bathroom, his hand goes unerringly to grab a bar, the doorjamb or the edge of a shelf. If I put my arm around him, he acts as if he's unaware of my assistance. He wants to manage on his own.

Periodically he asks me, "When are you going back to Ohio?"

I lie and tell him, "One of these days," because I know he doesn't want to think that he's not going to get better (which he's not) and that I've come to stay with him until he dies. Though it would be completely out of character for him to ask for assistance in killing himself, he might one day remember those pills and ask me for them. If he does, I will give them back, but not happily. I'm not ready for him to die.

ALL SPRING AND SUMMER I THINK ABOUT THOSE Nembutals nestled in my dresser drawer. My father's mind keeps deteriorating, his memory failing and his nouns growing more elusive.

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