
CANCER ISN'T GRACEFUL

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When I would tell people that my mother was undergoing treatment for cancer, I frequently got the impression that the listener was flashing to a paler-than-normal Meryl Streep baking cookies and lovingly throwing a costume party to cheer up her grieving family.

I, too, would run a fast slideshow of cultural highlights from an entertainment industry that has done much to promulgate the Graceful Flight Through Cancer myth. Who wouldn't want to curl up in bed next to a napping Diane Keaton, facing down death with her elegant Navajo jewelry and crisp white blouses intact?

Films tend to skip any depiction of the horrific drawn-out hospital stay, except to pan past the beatific patient, lovingly managing her children's fears. The unattainable cultural standard of the Ideal Cancer Patient has left my generation mystified to find our ill mothers behaving more like Pacino's Roy Cohn in "Angels in America" than a wan Deborah Winger.

Mystified and isolated. My sister and I had each other to mutually bear witness, but friends of mine who are only children took years to confess that the illness had flipped some switch in their parent's brain, unleashing torrents of abuse they felt they had no right to staunch, let alone admit to. Once I started digging, stories poured in from women my age across the country who were desperate for someone they could talk to without sounding "horrible."

After listening to these echoing experiences I started to theorize about what could be causing this en masse personality flip. The unfortunate fact is that the terror and suffering induced by cancer and its treatments reduces its host to an utterly dependant state. A state not unlike infancy, where one's very survival is at the mercy of others.

And here's the thing my friends and I have realized in the last ten years about bringing adults of the Baby Boom generation back to their infancy – it didn't have all that much to recommend it the first time around.

We remembered that our parents were children when alcoholism was called "having a

drink with dinner," beatings were on par with time-outs, and everybody had a "dirty uncle." Female hysteria was a legitimate medical diagnosis, lynchings were a legitimate stand-in for due process, and sexual preferences weren't legitimate. Our parents' parents' parenting was as much informed by the Great Depression and World War II as ours is by Whole Foods and PBS.

So it isn't surprising that stripping an adult of all the power they've put between themselves and the horror-show that was their childhoods brings out a latent rage that could cow The Hulk. Two downsides to this rage: one is that the person they are really angry at, the one who, say, forgot to feed them (yes, you read that right) is now long dead. And the other is that it makes it *really* challenging to connect with them at a time when you want to be sharing all the big un-expressables: your love, your gratitude, your memories.

So I have compiled this list, with many people's input, a little Guide to Surviving the Surviving, for those of you whose mother might go the Roy Cohn route. You are not alone.

1. She is talking at you, but she is not talking *to* you. *You* didn't make her go to school every day in a sweater that said Mary on it, even though that isn't her name. Go kick the vending machine and then let it go. You *did* plump her pillow, bring all her New Yorkers, trim the cat's claws, brush her teeth. You are taking care of her, her house, her business, and probably her husband. She just can't hold it in her head. Stop expecting her to. It will only make you crazy. And the Crazy Train is full because...

2. Morphine is evil. In hospitals they call it the Mean Drug. Don't visit when they're on the morphine. It's not worth it. They will choose this moment to share that you were an unplanned pregnancy that cut all their hopes and dreams short, and the next day won't even remember you visited. You get all the trauma and none of the credit. A byproduct of the inalienable fact that...

3. She wants to be the baby – let her. Dig deep and cull every maternal molecule in your body; you will need them. She may look like Bette Davis, but pretend she's Shirley Temple. Fuss over her like a toddler, with no expectations of acknowledgement or gratitude. The contented expression on her face as she sucks down her juice box is thanks enough. But just in case...

4. Keep a spare bouquet handy. Even if her bedroom looks like the Macy's Easter Show she will suddenly remember some neighbor she had twenty years ago and *fixate* in a blind rage (see #2) about their floral negligence (this fixation on being neglected might have more to do with being left at home alone from the age of four, but who's to say?). At this moment it is great to produce the spare bouquet and reassure her she is loved and remembered, even by people she stopped speaking to during the Carter administration.

5. This is her life coming to a crashing halt, not yours. We understand it's so tempting, in the absence of a useful medical degree, to Magically Think that the only other way to heal the patient is through a shaman-esque commitment to sleep-deprivation, hygiene abandonment, and a nutritional nadir. But you will wake up one day to find she is going home and you are forty pounds overweight, single and don't smell all that good. This is the proverbial marathon. Remember to nurture your body and your life so you are excited to be in both when this is over.

6. Some day soon she will be home, surrounded by all the furnishings and comforts that ground her in the present, in the home she made, the life she built. Little by little, day by day, she will start to feel more in control. And you will want less and less, day by day, to reach across the divide and throttle your dead grandparents. She will come back to herself, the person you wanted to care for in the first place. And you will come back, too.

Emma McLaughlin and **Nicola Kraus** are the authors of three New York Times bestsellers: [The Nanny Diaries](#), [Citizen Girl](#) and [Dedication](#) out in paperback July '08. They live and write in New York City.

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