

Murray, Again

by Betty Krasne

It's not easy to kill your mother if you're a divorced woman. None of the experts bothered to tell me that, starting with the vision of my father when he began visiting in my kitchen on her behalf.

"So, Mollykins, how long are you going to let your mother go on like this?"

I see my father standing in the kitchen in his underwear: white boxer shorts and a sleeveless white undershirt. He looks scrawny, but my childhood memory implants muscles on his slightly bent form. Underwear was what he used to have on when he made his special clam chowder at the beach.

Why my father cooked in his underwear and why the favorite dish of Murray Shapiro, the friendly corner pharmacist, was clam chowder are questions I now wonder about. And why, I wonder, is his ghost visiting me, his daughter, Molly Shapiro Eccleston, who had the unsuitable husband, against whom Doc Shapiro shook his fist, though he died, fortunately, before my divorce.

He never had to hear about how finding the Swedish au pair in the bathtub with my husband sent Derrick Eccleston back across the sea where my father thought he belonged. Or maybe it was Murray Shapiro's machinations from beyond the grave that sent Derrick on his way.

"What kind of question is that anyway?" I interrogate the vision in my kitchen. "What do I have to do with how long my mother goes on? All I do is go to her apartment as often as I can after work each week. I just bring whatever they need."

Each time his apparition appears in my kitchen I call Aural to see how things are going with this odd couple, my mother and her forever housekeeper, now her keeper.

"About the same Miz Molly," Aural tells me each time. "She moans a lot at night. But she ate a good breakfast. I fixed her a scrambled egg and toast."

Next time Murray appears I tell him, "She's eating well."

"So what good does it do? She doesn't look like Doc Shapiro's wife anymore. Have you seen her legs? They can't even hold her up anymore."

And how does he know about her legs, about the tumors spreading at will throughout her body? His Ethel was a big woman with a deep laugh. He never saw gray hair. "Look," I want to tell him, "you died twenty years ago. She's been managing on her own, with Aural's help, for years. After you died she ran the whole volunteer program for the hospital."

"But Mollykins, she's in pain. You're going to let her suffer like this, your mother? I never let you, or Stanley, or your mother suffer for a minute."

He's right, of course. I remember the large blue jars of Noxema, the painfully cool feel of it, the crisp smell as he told mother to cover my burning red skin after the first bad burn of the summer each year; the pills so I wouldn't itch and scratch when I had chicken pox; the medicine for cramps he had mother give me when I was a teen, too embarrassed to talk to him but doubled up with pains each month. I remember my brother, Stanley, swathed in carefully wound Ace bandages. "So why should you suffer?" our father would always say.

But he was a pharmacist. What does he expect me to do, leave her out in a storm? Cook up wild mushrooms? How can I, Molly Shapiro Eccleston, end the pain of Ethel Shapiro's spreading lung cancer?

I call Laura, my old college roommate, in Hartford. "My mother has lung cancer. The doctors give her a year. She refuses to try any treatments, says they'll only drag out her situation." I don't tell her about the visitations from my long deceased father, about his pleas on mother's behalf.

"How long has she been sick?" Laura, in her take-charge Economics Professor voice, sounds as though we can alter the situation if we only get a handle on the facts.

"She's been going down hill for a while, but she didn't want to go to the doctor. When Stanley was up here last month he said she looked terrible and insisted she get a check up. They say it's spread already. That's why she gets out of breath."

"Is she in pain?"

I picture my mother's bedroom, which these days looks like backstage at the pharmacy when I was little. Everything from the medicine chest has been tumbled out onto the dresser. For every prescription there is another one to counter its effects . . . the one that keeps her from sleeping and the one that puts her to sleep; the one for pain, which is constipating, and the one for her bowels. "She has pain, but she takes stuff."

"Is there anything that can be done?"

"I don't know what we can do, but watching her suffer like this is awful."

Stanley calls from New York. "Aureal says the nights are terrible."

Is my brother seeing ghosts too? "Stanley, she has pills for the pain, pills for sleeping. Don't you and Margo worry. We're doing everything we can."

"Molly, I'm sending you a book. Read it."

"A book? A book about what?"

"Read it and we'll talk. Come down to New York for a weekend. We can't discuss this on the phone." Stanley sounds like he has been getting frequent visitations from our father.

"Stanley, I have a job. It's tough enough finding time to keep running over to see Mother and to pick up the stuff on the lists Aureal gives me. One week they're vegetarians, so I stock up, then I get a call that they want hamburgers and hot-dogs."

"All right, I'll come up. The next long weekend, we'll drive up and talk."

The package arrives from Stanley. I handle it as gingerly as a potential bomb. Inside the padded paper bag is a paperback, a do-it-yourself book on death. Reading it through, I am struck by how difficult it is arranging to leave this world, not really a do-it-yourself project at all, yet my evening paper tells me that people of every age are wiped away instantly everywhere, every minute.

I close my eyes, fearing the return of Murray's ghost if I do not keep Aureal supplied with macaroni and cheese, smoked salmon, chocolate mousse cake, whatever the mood strikes them. Murray has been avoiding me. Maybe I, the good daughter now, have appeased his spirit.

"Stanley," I call to consult, "we have to do something right now. Mother needs someone to help out evenings and weekends, when Aureal isn't there."

He wants to know if I received the book, if I've read it. I assure him I've done the assigned reading. "But we have to find someone to help right now."

"You mean to live with her? Then what about Aureal?" he wants to know. "Are you going to have two shifts, people coming and going every day?"

Now that he gets down to the details, the problem unravels before me like a dropped spool of thread rolling out of sight. But from his position in New York everything seems doable. "Ask around. People may know a good employment agency for home care."

My fellow teachers at the school for the deaf turn out to be a mine of information on the care and feeding of frail parents. Everyone has a story, advice. But suddenly Murray is here again. "Money," he stands at the window saying to no one in particular, "keeps you warm in winter and cool in summer." What am I supposed to make of this advice: am I guilty of cutting corners on Mother's care by picking the house-brand macaroni and cheese?

A week of interviews at Mother's apartment and daily consultations with Stanley finally puts us back on an even keel. Aureal moves in three days a week; Lureene, a Seventh Day Adventist from the West Indies, takes over four days a week. "It's only money," I assure Stanley about our extraordinary nursing costs.

Lureene will never be numbered among the great cooks of the Western Hemisphere, but she has an unusual sense of style. Mother has a *nouvelle chic* whenever I arrive on Lureene's watch—a bright blue scarf draped around her thin neck, spots of rouge on her papery cheeks, a red sweater thrown jauntily over her stooped shoulders. The brave attempts call forth compliments on how well mother looks, but make me sad. How can my mother be no more than an old rag doll manipulated by this stranger? Mothers, by definition, are those who take care of others. Later, but I do not know this until the undertaker asks for clothes, I find Lureene has taken, like a totem, some of those colorful touches she favored.

Stanley and Margo drive up Friday evening for the Memorial Day weekend. We take a tour of our childhood haunts: the corner where the drugstore was; our high school; the Shapiro apartment house. The better parts are dilapidated; the rest is a war zone.

We drive out to the beach. At dinner near the shore I look out over the sailboats, remembering how I sat on our porch with Derrick, my elegant suitor arrayed in white trousers and navy jacket with his English yacht club emblem on his pocket. I remember how Murray stormed around the house about my wanting to marry a foreigner while Mother kept trying to keep our affairs from being broadcast through summer screens.

"Does she get any pleasure out of life?" Stanley interrupts my reverie.

The question seems impossibly important; life and death hinge on the answer. I dawdle over my lobster, executing a complicated maneuver with a claw, dripping butter that has to be wiped up. "She enjoys seeing me, when she's awake. She seems to like some of her food." I sidestep the issue.

"And the pain, the pills take care of it?"

Margo's gaze is fixed on the harbor. Her parents are both dead. Ethel is her children's only remaining grandparent. She too has read the how-to-do-it death book Stanley sent me. She knows where this conversation is leading.

"The pain?" I repeat Stanley's question, nodding at the waiter so he can remove the lobster carcass. "The pills are pretty strong, and the doctor isn't stingy with them." The minute I say this, I too can see where we have been heading.

Margo turns from the window and glances at Stanley. Her father took five difficult years to die. Then, later, her mother was in an institution for three years before she

finally died. Stanley sits back in his chair and plays with his spoon while the waiter shovels away the debris we have created. Then my brother leans towards me confidentially and I'm surprised to see how gray his hair is. "Suppose you left the bottle where she could get at it herself. What do you think she'd do?"

As I picture the bedroom I realize, to my own surprise, "The pills are right there on the dresser all the time. The medicines are kept on a tray on the dresser."

"Can she get there by herself?"

Anyone listening would think, from our tone, we were discussing whether she can tie her own shoe laces, not whether she can do away with herself. "She goes right by there on the way to the bathroom, but the nurse is with her." Mother's slow progress around the apartment with a walker has a certain stateliness about it, like royalty taking time to pay gracious attention to the lesser details of life. "She could get there with the walker, if she wanted to."

"But she doesn't want to, that's what you're saying?" Stanley glances away and back, frustrated at how a strong, grown man can be impotent in the face of such discreditable forces as fragility, pain, and disease. He reminds me of our father.

No. And yes. "It's not something she would do, would think of doing, is able to do." And suppose, I think of pointing out, she suddenly popped pills until she keeled over, enough to put her out, to become a vegetable that went on living, would anyone be better off?

We arrive at a scenario for tomorrow's visit: Stanley will give Mother her pain medicine in the living room, and leave the bottle on the end table near her chair. "Don't forget a plastic bag," Margo reminds us. No one says anything. We have all read the book. We know the role of the plastic bag, but that is not for me.

That night Murray makes a gloomy appearance over the top of my newspaper. "Mollykins, it's too late."

Too late for what? How can it ever be too late to stop pain? I telephone Laura. "Things are not good." We talk about Stanley's ideas and for a moment I forget myself. "My father doesn't want her to suffer."

There's a pause. "What did you say?" Laura asks.

"I mean he wouldn't want her to suffer. He made a career out of seeing that people didn't suffer."

Laura speaks with the calmly detached voice of someone who spends her days explaining mathematical models. "Your father doesn't have to live with your decisions, only you do."

Our mother is so busy rising to the occasion of a visit from all her children that she does not even register the presence of the medicines Stanley has placed on a tray by her elbow. If anyone has brought a plastic bag, it is not in evidence.

But a week later, when Aural calls to tell me Ethel fell and broke her wrist, when I visit her in the hospital because her feet have ballooned out, and she asks me how my husband is, I would like to open negotiations with Murray again.

Instead it is the doctor with whom I have to negotiate. Stanley is gloomy. "We've lost control of the situation. They'll keep her going now no matter what." But instead, the doctor proposes Mother be moved to a hospice.

The next day I finally call my son, Douglas, in England. "It's a good time to think about coming home," I alert him to the hospice news. There is an echo on the international wire, each word reverberating as though shouted from opposite ends of a tunnel. Douglas announces he is going to college again, to take science and become a doctor.

What an age we have come to: children figuring out how to end their mother's life, children trying to redo their school days. This was not the world I looked out on from Ethel and Murray's porch at Nantasket Beach, before Derrick sailed into my life, before Douglas was born, before, I feel like growling into the phone, we paid for our son to go to college the first time.

Death, when it arrives, does not come from pills or plastic; it comes drip by drip. The night before the funeral Murray visits me "Don't forget to talk about how Ethel was a good, strong woman," he instructs me.

"Look," I tell him, "nothing is simple anymore. That was one Ethel. The Ethel in the box is another Ethel."

"So when was life ever simple?" He shrugs and turns away. "Don't go," I feel like saying. "I'm an orphan now."

At the funeral, a small graveside affair Margo and her children help organize, I stand between Aural and Douglas. Douglas is taller than I remembered. Margo comes prepared with copies of assorted appropriate readings she has collected over the years of family funerals. Laura and her daughter, Debra, stand between my clan and Stanley's family. Funerals are our last tribal rite.

Afterward we sit in Ethel's garden apartment, eating turkey sandwiches and assuring Aural that the end, which she was there daily to witness, was for the best.

Douglas agrees to help disassemble his Grandmother's apartment. Together we roam the rooms like intruders, not sure where our prying will be the least embarrassing. Gingerly I open dresser drawers, as though leery of discovering some terrible family secret.

So this is what it comes down to, a household as old and shriveled as an aged body: four nightgowns, a small pile of underpants and bras turned yellow, a few blouses and sweaters hanging above a neat row of sensible shoes. Douglas moves as though the apartment must be full of a highly contagious disease. "You have to take something of Grandma's," I tell him.

Murray has been to visit. "Junk? You're going to let our lifetime turn to junk? We raised two fine children, ran a business, were good neighbors and voting citizens, and you're going to have everything carted away to a thrift shop or dumped in the incinerator?"

But there comes the inevitable moment when we must transgress, deranging my mother's historic order. Aural brings shopping bags, sense, order. Her church, she says, knows people who can use clothes, pots, pans with their blackened outsides almost the color now of the scratched Teflon insides. Stanley's children arrive with a station wagon, leaving faded squares on walls and empty places beside chairs.

I call Debra to see if she and her husband would like some souvenirs. They come over one evening and we make the house tour, the apartment already scavenged from the stationwagonfull Margo has pushed Stanley to take away, the shopping bags Aural has carried off. Douglas, fortified by the company of his peers, says he too would like a few of Grandma's pieces. Debra and Michael offer to keep them for him until he knows where he will be living.

"Murray," I tell him that night, "You can rest easy: reincarnation is at hand in multiple homes along the eastern seaboard."