

"Paliative Care Its more than you think"

Ted

Ted, my latest Palliative client, died the other day. I miss him. I know they all die; that's why we're a Palliative service. But it's a surprise, sometimes a shock, when they go. I'm always taken unawares. Two weeks ago, I was sitting at Ted's table watching him slowly, carefully, compiling his breakfast bowl of cereal, fruit, skim milk and a hundred thousand tablets out of his daily Do-Set box. He made both of us a cup of tea, refusing my offer of assistance, delivering the cups to the table at a glacial pace.

I'd been visiting Ted weekly for about six months by then, sitting with him for four hours while his wife, Mandy, went out to shop, keep her own medical appointments or simply get her hair done; a break from her constant vigilance over Ted, a break to think about her own life for a few hours, a break from their tiny, claustrophobic flat. She was never late returning from these outings, and, as she came through the door, her eyes would search for Ted, making a quick assessment of his physical state and his mood, before they each grunted a brief greeting. These abrupt 'Hi's' always intrigued me, because their eyes betrayed a deep, unspoken mutual devotion.

When our Palliative Co-ordinator first introduced me to Ted, he already appeared frail and depleted from the advanced stages of his several illnesses. He'd been diagnosed with an enlarged heart some years before, and now it was failing. His stomach was grossly distended with litres of fluid that his heart no longer had the strength to push through his body. His kidneys had almost given up, and ten years ago he'd begun to lose his sight, and had only four per cent vision left in each eye.

But they were bright eyes, full of quick intelligence and twinkling with a razor wit. He loved to write rhymes about people he knew. If a trip to hospital for drainage of his fluid went well, he would thank the staff in humorous verse, much to their delight. A bad stay brought forth no poetry at all.

It only took a couple of weeks for me to look forward eagerly to my visits with Ted. While he was an engaging storyteller, even our silences were companionable. Ted loved a joke, and we clicked when I told him the Pope joke, the one where the Pope gets mistaken for God's

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chauffeur. We soon discovered that we agreed on a raft of subjects, ranging from world affairs to local politics to TV scandals. One day he said to me,

'You know, since you've been coming it's been amazing.'

'I'm not sure what you mean,' I replied.

'Amazing'.

Then he drifted into a different conversation. But I think I know what he meant. His other visitors were purposeful health professionals, or a few casual friends who didn't stay long. A Palliative volunteer might stay for four hours, and, if the client is up to it, that's plenty of time for lengthy chats. And he loved to chat.

The flow of hospital poetry dwindled to a trickle as his visits for drainage became more frequent. Each stay they would remove twenty five litres, bringing him brief respite from discomfort and giving his laden heart some ease.

Thoughtlessness made some of these stays more difficult than they might have been. Sometimes staff would forget to put up a 'Vision Impaired' sign, even after Mandy requested it. This meant that he missed meals because he couldn't see what was on his plate, nor cut it up; sometimes he would be placed in the bed furthest from the bathroom and had several incontinence accidents while attempting to find his way there. These events embarrassed and upset him for weeks after he returned home and caused him to dread the next stay.

Mandy became his staunch hospital advocate and negotiated with staff to ease his many discomforts. She remarked that, while she might seethe inside, she never 'lost her cool' with staff, saving it up until she could stamp around her own kitchen and complain to Anne, her neighbour and best friend.

I loved listening to Ted talking about Mandy while she was out of the flat. Like most long-term couples, face to face they were fairly prosaic in conversation, but the minute she was out the door Ted would sing Mandy's praises as 'the best wife and nurse in the world'.

When Ted wasn't around I would pass on these compliments to Mandy, as I suspect I was meant to. She always seemed a little surprised.

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Three weeks ago, Ted announced that he thought he'd turned a corner. He felt a little fitter and stronger, he said, and started doing some hand exercises in readiness for a return to bowls. I was pleased but puzzled. Early on in our relationship Ted said he was philosophical about facing death sooner rather than later. But as the weeks went by and I watched him thin and weaken and slip into long sleeps, he changed. When the visiting nurse told him these events were normal for his stage of illness he replied crossly:

'Stage? Stage of illness? The only stage I'm interested in is the one where I go back to playing bowls again. I'm workin' on it, you just see!'

I watched Mandy becoming sadder as she watched him slipping away. Fortunately for me, she loved a good hug. I think I stole as much comfort from them as I gave.

Soon after, Ted stumbled in the bathroom, falling heavily and breaking his hip. He survived surgery but lapsed into confusion and apparent unconsciousness. Not long before he died, Mandy told me, a bowling mate visited him in hospital.

'G'day Ted', he'd shouted, 'why don't you get up out of that bed and share a bottle of red with me?'

Ted's face had split into a wide grin. I can see that grin in my mind's eye. That's how I will remember him.

Vale Ted.

Donna MacKenzie

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