Living Dyingly

More and more of us are writing our own obituaries. Some of us meticulous planners write a few paragraphs that we hope will be printed in our local newspaper or on our funeral programs after we die. However, most of us are creating detailed digital narratives every day, sharing images and words that will remain available long after we're gone. There are websites devoted to memorializing the dead, virtual cemeteries where our life stories continue. These days, when we say the dead are always with us, we are hardly being metaphorical. Hundreds of images of the dead, or some previous version of them, can be as close to us as the smartphones in our pockets. Facebook accounts that remain open after someone has died continue to receive messages, many of which are addressed directly to the dead.

A few years ago, an artist I was acquainted with died of lung cancer when he was in his early thirties. Each year on his birthday, he still gets a slew of new messages on his Facebook wall. People tell him how much they love him and miss him. Some of the messages make it seem as though he were traveling.

"I know you're in a better place," a family member writes, "but I still miss you."

In the past, only close relatives might have had access to notes or letters left behind in sealed boxes in attics or basements. Now everything we write online or share on social media becomes potential fodder for our eulogies or obituaries. Still, it's easier to draft a self-eulogy or obituary when one is healthy and well, when death is still an abstraction rather than a constant companion. When people are sick or dying, the act of putting together final thoughts about oneself is much more laden with emotion, and one fluctuates daily, sometimes hourly, between all five stages of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's grief cycle of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.

My mother spent several weeks before she died recording a series of monologues on a handheld audiocassette player she'd had for years. On the cassette, she leaves detailed funeral instructions and advice for my brothers and me on how to treat each other and raise our kids.

On the cassette, she never quite says, "I know I am dying." Instead, she says, "Be patient with your children and love them, like I loved you."

She never told me she was recording this cassette. She must have done it late at night when she was alone with her thoughts. She was possibly struggling with her fear of dying, which, to borrow from Ernest Hemingway's "iceberg principle"—in which, like an iceberg, one eighth of a narrative is clearly seen or "above water"—must have been the other seven-eighths.

"I'm not necessarily dying either today or tomorrow," she says, showing a gradual evolution toward acceptance. "But we all must die one day."

I was surprised to learn, a few years ago, that many newspapers prewrite obituaries for public figures. Though my mother was not a public person, I wish I'd prewritten her obituary while she was dying. I wish I had been courageous enough to crack the iceberg and ask her what she wanted said about her at her funeral. I suppose she might have mentioned something on her cassette if it had been that important to her. After all, she told me what kind of shoes I should wear to her wake. (No open toes.) In addition to the "iceberg," humor would have been one of my mother's tools if she were writing her death.

I don't know very much about my mother's childhood, because she never liked to talk about it. The fact that I know so little about her early life means that I will not be able to fully reconstruct her on the page. But I have already created fictional versions of my mother, taking the bits I know and morphing them into different women, some who are like I imagined her to be, some who are like I wanted her to be, and others who represent the worst-case scenario, the worst mother I could possibly have had. My mother has given birth to

more women than me, and perhaps in her death she will breed even more.

After my mother died, I called her two younger sisters, my aunts Grace and Thérèse, and asked them to tell me some interesting details about her childhood that I could include in her eulogy. My aunts ended up telling me some of the few things I already knew: that my mother was the sixth of nine children, that her lifelong hobby was sewing and embroidering, and that as a young woman she made extra money by embroidering elaborate trousseaus for brides. Each time my mother designed and embroidered a tablecloth or a sheet for one of her clients, she also made one for herself, so by the time she met my father, she already had everything she needed to set up her own house. Still, I want more. I want more than my mother was willing to leave me in words. But even if my mother had also retold me these exact same things, I still wish I'd heard them again, one final time, from her.

My mother did not leave behind an obituary, but she left behind her cassette.

"I love you okay" is all she says in English, even after having lived in the United States for over forty years. The rest of the cassette is in Haitian Creole. And to me, she keeps saying, "*Met fanm sou ou.*" "Be your own woman"; "Be a strong woman."

I fill in the rest of that phrase, knowing that this is what she must have been thinking: Be the woman I raised you to be.

When you're young, your parents can seem immortal, then they get terminally ill and they remove the possibility of either you or them being immortal. When they die, you realize what it's like to suddenly occupy an ambiguous space in the world. If both your parents, who are the people who created you, can die, then you too can die. With this in mind, you become acutely aware that we are all "living dyingly," as the writer and commentator Christopher Hitchens calls it in *Mortality*, a collection of the essays initially published in *Vanity Fair* magazine the year before he died of esophageal cancer.

"My chief consolation in this year of living dyingly has been the presence of friends," Hitchens writes. "I can't eat or drink for pleasure anymore, so when they offer to come it's only for the blessed chance to talk."

Unlike ordinary talk, which can become routine, this kind of talk is pressing, urgent. It has an expiration date, of which those who are caught up in the regular routine of life are not yet aware. My mother, I imagine, used her cassette as her own blessed chance to talk. And like Hitchens's lyrical, clever, and sometimes sarcastic essays, Mom's monologues were much more about life than death. Her blessed chance to talk, like

Hitchens's blessed chance to write, was in itself a kind of hopeful story.

We cannot write about death without writing about life. Stories that start at the end of life often take us back to the past, to the beginning—or to some beginning—to unearth what there was before, what will be missed, what will be lost. Whether we love or hate them, the people dying on the page must somehow reveal themselves to us. We must be invested in their fate, whether we want them to live or die.

The final moment of death, especially when a prolonged illness is involved, is one of many deaths, anyway. Smaller deaths precede it, including, among other things, possibly one's loss of autonomy and dignity. When faced with their own death, writers—and, in fiction, characters—develop their own lingua franca to describe their dying. That language sometimes changes as death nears, but it might also remain the same.

In *Mortality*, Hitchens never seems to waver, on the page at least, in his steadfast determination not to feel sorry for himself. Even while describing the indignities he suffered as a cancer patient, he skillfully adds some levity and humor.

"I heard a soothing and capable voice saying, 'Now you might feel just a little prick,'" Hitchens writes.

"(Be assured," he adds: "Male patients have exhausted all the possibilities of this feeble joke within the first few days of hearing it.)"

I can almost see him smirking as he writes this. Dying is not taking everything away from him. The core of his personality is still intact: his intelligence, his sarcasm, his sense of humor. Though this is not true of everyone who is dying, at least it is for him and he wants us to know it. He wants his readers to realize that he's still hanging on, that he's still there.

Both in lifestyle and tastes, my mother was the complete opposite of Hitchens. He was an atheist and she was deeply religious. "God is good" was her mantra. *God Is Not Great* was the title of one of his most popular books. Everyone who came to visit my mother while she was sick, including her minister of forty years, who traveled from New York to Miami to see her, was told, "God sent you." The one thing Hitchens and my mother did have in common, though, was that neither one seemed too interested in what Joan Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, calls "the question of self-pity," or in asking themselves, "Why me?"

Hitchens in *Mortality*

To the dumb question "Why me?" the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: Why not?

Mom after a chemo session

I am almost eighty years old. I don't have small children. Why not me, instead of some young woman with babies?

"I don't *have* a body, I *am* a body," Hitchens writes.

A body that, in my mother's case, shortly before she died, had to have feces extracted from it by hand, and blood-tainted fluid pumped out of it via her belly, every few weeks.

"There is a river inside me," my mother would say half-jokingly, "and it never stops flowing."

We are all bodies, but the dying body starts decaying right before our eyes. And those narratives that tell us what it's like to live, and die, inside those bodies are helpful to all of us, because no matter how old we are, our bodies never stop being mysterious to us. Many of us don't pay much attention to our well bodies. Our sick bodies and the sick bodies of our loved ones become our obsessions. We have no idea how one part—the brain, for example—might be functioning so well, while the rest of the body is failing. How can one lung or kidney be diseased and the other one be perfectly fine? It is perhaps the act of defending separate parts of the body that eventually kills the entire organism.

In her 1989 book, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag writes of that book's 1978 predecessor, *Illness as Metaphor*, that she didn't think it would be useful to write "yet one more story in the first person of how someone learned that she or he had cancer, wept, struggled, was comforted, suffered, took courage . . . though mine was also that story."

She did not want to share deeply personal experiences that because of their common occurrence had become hackneyed, as even death can become a cliché. So Sontag drew on stories that had already been written, including Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, and she wrote her own book, "spurred by evangelical zeal as well as anxiety about how much time I had left to do any living or writing in."

That zeal goes along with a chronicler's persistent desire to share, and a sense of gratitude for that blessed chance to talk.

In *The Cancer Journals*, poet and activist Audre Lorde sees many parallels between the fourteen years she spent battling breast cancer and the other struggles she'd had throughout her life as a black feminist, lesbian, mother, and "warrior poet."

Even while comparing her mastectomy to the way the Amazons of Dahomey chopped off their right breasts to become better archers, she still mourns her intact body.

> I want to write of the pain I am feeling right now, of the lukewarm tears that will not stop coming into my eyes—for what? For my lost breast? . . . For the death I don't know how to postpone? Or how to meet elegantly?

Both Lorde and Sontag set out goals for their "living dyingly" texts. Maybe this has something to do with

the urgency of their mission. There's no time for exposition or warm-up, just a vital task to be completed.

How does one prepare to meet death elegantly? And what if there's no elegance to be had, especially if one is being ravaged by pain, or is losing control of one's limbs or bowels? Is our job as writers the same as that of caretakers? As writers, we might seek the least elegant death possible for our characters, while we would want our loved ones to die "soft as cream," as Toni Morrison writes in *Beloved*. That tension has been most elaborately explored by dying writers who, like Hitchens, Sontag, and Lorde, have had that blessed chance to write.

After her mastectomy, when she couldn't write, Audre Lorde recorded on cassette tapes her thoughts on mortality and other issues.

> In playing back the tapes of those last days in the hospital, I found only the voice of a very weakened woman saying with the greatest difficulty and almost unrecognizable: . . . *I don't want this to be a record of grieving only. I don't want this to be a record only of tears.*

Lorde is admonishing herself, even in her weakest state. Though she has become both a writer and a recorder of a dying body, she does not want to write only of loss and grief. She doesn't want to make dying the central story.

Four months after my mother died, I realized while rereading *The Cancer Journals* that I was the same age that Audre Lorde was when she had her first mastectomy.

"I am 46 years living today and very pleased to be alive, very glad and very happy," she writes on that birthday.

Reading this somehow reassured me that one could indeed "live dyingly." Or die livingly. At least on the page. After all, to die, to echo *Peter Pan*, can be "an awfully big adventure." As the father of the essay, Michel de Montaigne, writes, "Dying . . . is the greatest work we have to do," yet we can't get good at it by practicing, since we experience it only once. Death also cannot exist in isolation, even when someone dies alone. Death announces itself in the middle of a life being lived, in media res.

"There is no such thing as a natural death," Simone de Beauvoir writes in *A Very Easy Death*, her account of the final weeks of her mother's life, "You do not die from being born, nor from having lived, nor from old age. You die from *something*. . . . Cancer, thrombosis, pneumonia: it is as violent and unforeseen as an engine stopping in the middle of the sky. . . ." Or we die of death, as Gabriel García Márquez has written: death, which he once referred to as "the only important thing that happens in a lifetime." Dying, especially prolonged dying, is rarely passive or monotonous. Dying people

are engaged in the most significant battle of their lives. Dying is not, as Tolstoy puts it in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, "a case of the appendix or the kidney, but of life . . . and death."

The act of writing, or talking about one's death, makes one an active participant in one's life. Those who write, or make cassettes, about dying are not dying passively, so we should not write about them that way. Even their final surrender, if it ever comes, is a hard-won process. Whether young or old, dying people are not usually expected to submit but to fight.

It is not surprising that Dylan Thomas's almost century-old poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is so often invoked when we talk about the dying. We might be tempted to whisper a few lines from that poem into the ears of our loved ones as they lie comatose in intensive care or spend their final days in hospice.

> And you, my father, there on that sad height,
> curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
> Do not go gentle into that good night.
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> And you, my mother, there on that sad height . . .
> Did you rage enough?

We like to think that our loved ones didn't surrender too quickly. It might comfort us to know they at least

tried to put up a fight, if not for their own sake but for ours, just to have one more hour, one more day, one more week, one more month, a few more years with us.

On my mother's cassette, I heard some ambivalence. She did not want to die ("I'm not necessarily dying either today or tomorrow"). But she eventually came to terms with the fact that she might ("But we all must die someday"). Still, she was not willing to rage, to fight until her final breath. Otherwise she would have chosen the second, harder course of chemotherapy.

While we, her children, generally respected her wishes, one of my brothers disagreed with her about stopping the chemotherapy. My mother had taken care of our father when he was terminally ill, and our father would have jumped at any opportunity to live a few more years. She was not going to live a few more years, my mother countered; she had only a few more weeks of prolonged suffering. Rather than fighting it, my mother embraced the dying of the light.

One of the sympathy cards I received after my mother died had a Lucille Clifton poem pasted inside it. The mother of the friend who'd sent me the poem had also recently died. The poem was called "oh antic God."

> oh antic God
> return to me
> my mother in her thirties

The hymnlike, staccato, pleading start to this poem immediately brought tears to my eyes. "Oh antic God," I wanted to scream, "return to me my mother from the day she was born. Give her another beginning and not an ending."

My mother at thirty-four was giving birth to me in Haiti. Then two years later she gave birth to my brother Bob. My mother at thirty-eight stayed behind in Port-au-Prince with my brother and me after my father moved to New York to look for work. Then she left us with my uncle Joseph and his wife, Tante Denise, to join my father in New York, when I was four. My mother in her late thirties was an undocumented immigrant living in Brooklyn, away from her two small children. She was a factory worker who made handbags for pennies on the dollar. My mother in her early forties had two more children, my brothers Kelly and Karl.

In Haitian Creole, when someone is said to be *lòt bò dlo*, "on the other side of the water," it can either mean that they've traveled abroad or that they have died. My mother at forty was already *lòt bò dlo*, on the other side of the water.