

Along Route '66



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Dear Classmates, Mates, and Friends,

Probably like you, I feel that this period of my life is scurrying on with increase pace at the same time that some inner whisper says, "Slow down and take a look at the surroundings." Well, the 25th Reunion year should be the point in time to answer the whisper. Let's see how I do.

Prior to arrival in Hanover for the Mini-Reunion on the 12th of October, this issue of Along Route 66 will be buttoned up and handed over the folks at Blunt that print and distribute these news items and musings. I am pleased to have gotten out the past two with little time between them and now can follow with this compendium of news and views. I am flying home from a short business trip to England and Germany. Business for my company, Peco Controls, has been very good in England and emerging on the Continent. Wedged into Flight 125 from Heathrow to San Francisco, I have a one year old on my right ready to destroy this effort. Business Class

was full so my frequent flier status with Pan Am did me no good this leg. As an erstwhile entrepreneur, I save on air fares like no one you have ever met in hopes that I can accumulate enough wealth so that Dartmouth can extract it down the road... say, what was that whisper I just heard? Getting to be a roar... better turn up this headset and get on with work.

Commitment. The 25th represents a big one for me. I will lose the weight I have put on since graduation (about 2 pounds a year). This, so you can recognize me come June. How about you? Something to shoot for in this special year? Be there, regardless.

From the News Department - A Doctor Writes

Doctors seem to write infrequently. As a group my impression is that you all prioritize your time very closely with class communication down below practice and family, well down. Come Reunion time, I hope the prospect of seeing classmate doctors will

bring all those priority claims together. I know that the new Hitchcock Medical Center (Out near Landers, which is now an Italian Restaurant) should be an extra incentive for this distinguished component of our class to return... and raise a little hell.

I received a note a while back from **Bruce Berger**, with some important news, first, he reported that he "Saw **Rick and Judy Firtel** while Rick was consulting at Princeton University. Rick is at UCSD [that would be the University of California at San Diego] as a full professor in Biochemistry." Bruce also advised that he "Spoke to **Rod Prior** - practicing medicine in Maine." And, most importantly, Bruce announced, "My daughter will start Dartmouth in the fall (Class of '94)." And he added, "Look forward to our 25th." Thanks for the plug, **Bruce Jay Berger**. It's not such a long trip for Bruce and family from Hopewell, New Jersey, where Bruce practices as a dermatological surgeon in Princeton, but planned it must be. If you want to co-ordinate your planning with Bruce for the 25th, give him a call at 609-466-1620 (Home), or at 609-924-6600 if you are in need some skin work.

From another '94 parent, **Chris Sanger** wrote, "My daughter Amy will be attending Dartmouth come September." Chris modestly said nothing else about himself but did add that he, "Saw **Gerry Paul and Mike Nadel** at the Bat Mitzvah of Gerry's daughter in June. Both are lawyers. Gerry is in private practice in NYC. Mike is with the Brooklyn District Attorney's office, after a brief stint as a criminal court judge (Night Court?)." Chris wrote from 2 Oaklyn Court, Potomac, Maryland 20854, so he had a little jaunt for that Bat Mitzvah. Chris's telephone numbers are (301) 983-9287 (H) and (301) 656-4212 (B). I don't know what he does at the "B" number, although I am sure that the Yearbook will be able to elaborate.

About Our Reunion Project

As you recall, our Class Reunion Chairman, **David Johnston**, has made our Reunion the focus for something more than just conviviality and recollection. In the interests of adding a different and more substantive element to the 25th than that which is usually associated with the event, the Class of '66, under David's direction, is sponsoring a series

of programs put on by the Tucker Foundation focusing on modern family problems. In support of this program, **Walt Knoppfel**, dropped me a note to encourage us with "A rousing Wah-Hoo- Wah to **David Johnston** for his reunion project. A great idea that could have real impact for our children and their children." Walt writes as a parent of relatively young ones being raised in my City, but it makes little difference the issues are the same everywhere, and pertinent to us as a Class to be including in this period of reuning and reflecting. (Walt and family are home in San Francisco at 1723 Sanchez Street, 94131; Tel: (415) 824-3481 (H) and (415) 957-3081 (B)).

David has been working hard to get 66's involved in the Tucker Foundation Project. If you have an interest in participating, let him know. The following is a report from **Richard Abraham** on his experiences (as much as he could put on a "Take a Minute Card"). "Wife **Judy** and I spent the weekend of May 18 and 19 with **David and Hera Johnston** at the Tucker Foundation Retreat on Lake Morey. We tried to contribute some perspective and support to the 10 Dartmouth students who attended this intense session devoted to addictive behavior of all kinds. Some, but not all, of the students were suffering. Some were there to learn or lend their support. The Tucker Foundation facilitators were all talented and had clearly planned things out from a wealth of prior experience." **Richard and Judy** drove up from their home in Canton, CT (19 Pond Road). I wish I had a longer vehicle than the little green card since that shuts down the commentary just as it should be starting. If you want to add to this, **Richard**, please do. And I hope that more of you have the chance to be involved in this aspect of our reunion year.

David Johnston has followed his involvement of the class in this type of a 25th Renewal with a commitment of his own. Within the last few months, David has assumed the leadership of the Substance Abuse Council of Connecticut. This follows David's work in the private sector for many years. His whisper was a tad louder than some of ours.

Among Other Connecticut Changes

Also in Hartford, **Thomas D. Lips**, sent on the most recent announcement of his status in

the investment community. This one from Kidder, Peabody & Co, who were, "Pleased to announce that Thomas D. Lips has become a member a the firm as Vice President." Tom has been part of that backlash of uncertainty created by the problems that befell the demise of Drexell, Burnham. According to the notes I have, there was an interim situation before Tom found this outpost of GE in the securities industry. Good Luck, Tom!

As I pass by Tom's current association, I cannot help but comment on the fascination I have felt in this whole episode on Wall Street and attendant financial venues. People that many of us knew, or were cognizant of, at Dartmouth during our four years have been prominent in the news treatment of insider trading and related issues. With the S and L crisis in continuing ascent and the related fallout still being felt, I have a perverse feeling for the principals involved. For me the Dartmouth guys have always had white hats on, but that gets increasingly hard to support. A sobering reflection on who we are and who we were. Tough for me. How about you?

Tom in the meantime weathers it all. An innocent it seems, awash in the fallout. Meantime, Tom captains our memorial book program that acknowledges the deceased members of our Class by the donation of a nameplated edition to Baker in the Memory of Class Members.

Erstwhile Doctors

As mentioned above, most Classmates that are Doctors are not great communicators, let alone Journalists. That cannot be said for Peter Dorsen. He writes first, then he prescribes. Peter added in one of his most recent transmissions to me that "I am strongly contemplating returning to practice at least part-time for the dual purpose of money and to keep current in medicine. I am also attempting to validate myself by passing my certification as an exercise specialist and doing research (clinical) in the field." Peter sent on an article from the Dartmouth Fortnightly of April 20, 1990 that many of you probably read and related to in its treatment of "Propeller Beanies" and life at 45... all in the context of Beany and Cecil (The Sea-sick Sea Serpent). Peter writes well; a dusting off of the medical knowledge will only enhance that skill.

Peter wrote an article for the Minneapolis - St. Paul magazine dealing with his mother's death in 1986. Lydia's Last Days captures his experience with a process and event that all of us have experienced or will. I share it with you in this Along Route 66 and encourage you to read it.

Could This Be Censored?

Among the academic journalists, Richard Dellamora passed on the announcement that he had just published a work that we all can (perhaps) relate to entitled, Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism. UNC, Chapel Hill is the publisher for the author who resides at 57 DeGnussi Street, Toronto, Ontario; Tel: (416) 778-5400. Seems like something we all could offer comment on, at least in the abstract. As far as it applies to Victorian Aestheticism, I have to read the book.

Speaking of Publishing

Bob Cohn reports that he was, "Just appointed Senior Vice- President of the Magazine Publishers of America, the major trade association for the consumer magazine industry. After 20 years in publishing, I'm looking forward to the more global views and exposures." Bob works on Lexington in the Big Apple and lives at 44 Gramercy Park North, New York 10010; Tel: (212) 473-0350 (H) and (212) 752-0055 (B).

And Writing

James Stuart Edson advised that he, "Jim and friend Peg vacationed in Acadia, Penna- quid, Boothbay, Portland, and Ocean Park, Maine while enjoying photography and the fine 'down east' cuisine. Since publishing a book on the Adirondacks, I am continuing to write poetry and search for Social Studies positions." Jim also noted that he takes in the Central New York Club Christmas dinner whenever possible. Jim is in the area at Box 165, 873 Milford Drive, Skaneateles; Tel: (315) 685-6658 (H and B).

And from the Adirondacks out to the Cascades

Tom Noyes has succumbed to the lure (I wouldn't think that life in the Chicagoland would have anything to do with it) and has packed up with a Westward Ho! "After 15 years in the Chicago area, our family is taking the Oregon Trail out to Portland, Oregon to start anew the employment and family settling process. The prospect of being near some mountains and the seacoast is very exciting. I do get back to New Hampshire to see my Dad, Coach Ellie Noyes '32, Head Track Coach for many years. None of my four older children are at Dartmouth, but our youngest, Jimmy, will stand in line for the Class of 2008." [For the time being, Tom, let's think in terms of the 25th Reunion, the 40th is too far down the road yet.] Tom sent this on from Lincolnshire, Illinois, but it seems that a new address will be soon arriving for the Noyes.

From all reports, Tom has picked well. As a follow-up to the note on Henry Sharpe last issue, I noted that there was a new poll by corporations in terms of relocating and Seattle stood at the top of the list. Portland finished third in the same survey.

Free at Last!

The modern day bonds for many of us come in two forms: mortgages and tuitions. Bob Zartler reports that there is an end and it can change your life.

"With my last kid's college tuition expenses taken care of and with the help of Ann's full time job with Medical Benefits, I have left the corporate world and started my own business - A2Z Technology Partners. I provide training and assistance to small businesses and individuals in the use of PC's, telecommunications, voice/E-mail, fax, etc. It is longer hours than before but being able to do only the things that I enjoy doing is terrific. Maybe one day I'll even make some money." Bob has got a new business address at 30 Juniper Circle, Jamestown, Rhode Island 02835; Tel: (401) 423-0407 (H) and (401) 423-3731 (B).

Volunteer of the Year

At the risk of exposing himself to a withering series of requests for similar efforts from the College, Ron Safko was recently recog-

nized for his contributions to the Columbia, South Carolina area as "Volunteer of the Year." The Alumni office sent this press release from Columbia on to me (Ron would be far too modest) along with a head and shoulders shot of the 45 year old Ron Safko. Hirsute now with glasses, Ron bears a professorial look rather than the recollection I have of this former member of Coach Hamilton's Rainbow Raiders group. To give you an idea of how involved Ron has been as well as glean a personal update from the grist of the Press Release, I selected the following passages,

"Columbia architect, Ron Safko, Senior Principal of Safko Probst Architects, has been named as the recipient of the Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce's first annual 'Volunteer of the Year' award... Safko was cited for always making time to assist Chamber staff as well as volunteers, and his ability to see the 'big picture.' ... Safko designed the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial for the Columbia Jaycees and is assisting the Jaycees King Memorial Committee with fundraising and materials... In January, Safko received personal recognition from the Governor of South Carolina, Carroll A. Campbell in appreciation of his extraordinary assistance to the state and its citizens in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo last September... Volunteerism is central to the culture of Safko Probst Architects... Safko resides in Irmo with his wife and son, Mary and Ross."

The press release ran on to five pages, so you know there is lot that Ron has been doing to merit this recognition. Like so many rewards, it's not the reward that motivates (afterall, this one is the first annual), but it sure helps to know that on somebody else's scorecard, what you do is appreciated. A Wah-Hoo-Wah from the Class to Ron Safko and family!

An Overdue Note and Then I Think I'm Current

Sometime back (over a year ago, almost two, to be honest) I got a letter from Ken Meyercord in Virginia. It was a total update and passed on a copy of Ken's input to the College on re-writing of the Alma Mater. I saved this to put in a proper slot, and soon, it disappeared, now to reappear. So, Ken, I

apologize for the delay and ask you to bear with my restatement of the key parts of your update.

Ken and wife Samira have been married going on 20 years and have a son, Khaldun (16) and daughter, Nadia. Sounds like to the editor that Khaldun provides all the tests of parenting that anyone would ever need, and Nadia re-inforces the joy I fell with four daughters. Ken started out his career overseas in international affairs, returning some 13 years ago to join the high tech world of software. Since then, the Meyercords have been in the greater DC area and are now living at 1314 Northgate, Reston, VA 22090.

Ken had been out of touch with The College for sometime (a feat in itself) and thus joined the discussion regarding "Men of Dartmouth" very late. Too bad, as his suggestion to have a counterpoint verse developed for the "Women of Dartmouth" followed by a new "unified" verse has possibilities. Maybe this is some-

thing that the Dodecapronics can try out... they are the male and female Dartmouth singing ensemble, not replacing the "Aires" but adding to the alternatives in Hanover.

Ken, thanks for the letter. Please keep me on the list.

Some Wrap-up Notes

I am repeating my "About This Insert" and the Questionnaire in the hopes that this time the printing will be configured as I had hoped it would be. The idea is to have a single four pager that you can send on for the Yearbook. For all of you who have sent it in already, thanks, and I can manage. For those who haven't, please pull this one out and work on it as soon as possible. Don't forget the photo (s)!

So, let's prepare to move out from Gallup, Winona, and all those other spots along Route 66, and arrive in Hanover come June.

When a parent
becomes a child,
it is time
to forgive and forget.

IN EARLY DECEMBER 1986, my mother's helper, Marion, called to say that I must come immediately to Florida because Lydia, my mother, was dying. The call came as no surprise. After the death of my father from lung cancer in 1981, everything that could possibly go wrong with my mother had: chronic kidney failure ultimately requiring dialysis; breast cancer ultimately requiring mastectomies and chemotherapy; and finally triple-vessel heart-by-pass surgery with recurrent severe angina a year later. The last straw was rectal bleeding, which had led to her hospitalization in Florida. My sense as a physician was that this was more than my mother, a frail 90 pounds and herself a retired physician, could tolerate.

On the plane to Florida, I thought about the lifelong struggle I had experienced with my strong-willed, Hungarian-born mother. Ironically enough, I had turned out to be much like her: compulsive, hard driving, highly energized, honest to a fault. Over the years, my father had presided over the often fiery relationship between my mother and me. Dressed imperially in tie and jacket and seated at the head of the dinner table, he frequently resorted to humor to resolve the stand-off between us. The polio that had left him in a wheelchair from the time I was 5 did not detract from his ability to quell this nightly battle, which continued until I left for boarding school at 15.

It was my mother who patiently explained the facts of life to me as we flew together on one of our yearly family ski trips to Colorado. My father just couldn't manage the task reserved for father-and-son intimacy. I had discovered at an early age that the best way to spend time with my mother was by going on house calls with her; later, when I was in medical school, I would join her on hospital rounds. The condition was that I would keep quiet and not ask any embarrassing questions. I always asked some anyway. She was very proud of her son the aspiring doctor, who had chosen to follow in her footsteps.

It was well after 1 a.m. when I reached the hospital. The Florida air was heavy with humidity. Apprehensively entering through the emergency room, I began searching the dimly lighted halls for my mother's room. I found her lying with her mouth open, one leg dangling over the side of the bed. Her usually neatly combed and stylishly tinted hair was matted, and her bare chest was exposed, revealing scars from her recent surgery.

Fearing the worst, I shook her. *My God, I thought, she died before I could get here.* All types of guilt welled up inside me. Why hadn't I skipped Thanksgiving dinner and left my own family to look after her sooner? She slowly opened her eyes and recognized me. As I sat on her bed, she weakly took my hand and smiled.

"Peter, I'm so happy to see you're here," she whispered. The medication her physician had used to sedate her for a colon study had not yet worn off, and soon she fell back to sleep. Watching her breathe, I struggled with the spectacle of

Lydia's Last Days

BY PETER J. DORSEN

her frailty, remembering all the struggles we had been through since my father's abrupt death.

It seemed that everything had fallen apart since his final request: "Take care of your mother and treat her nicely." He spoke as he struggled for breath with lungs filled with fluid, the price of a life of smoking. To do what he asked would not be easy.

A month after my father's death, I got married—actually, Susy and I eloped—and my mother's anger became venomous. She demanded that I return a family promissory note, to keep it out of my new wife's hands. She feared that should something happen to me, Susy would assume the note and require my mother to pay her. Gradually she accepted our marriage, but never the way we had chosen to marry.

I began to suspect that my mother's irrational behavior after my father's death—an onslaught of inappropriate anger, hysteria and name calling—was partly due to a brain condition called encephalopathy resulting from the toxins building up in her body from worsening kidney disease. In fact, this proved true. I finally was able to convince her to have an evaluation for hemodialysis. She underwent the taxing, often painful dialysis runs twice and later three times a week.

A year after starting dialysis, she discovered a breast lump that turned out to be cancerous. After some convincing, she agreed to visit Minneapolis, where a mammogram revealed cancer in both breasts. A woman who prided herself on elegance, she considered it humiliating to undergo bilateral mastectomies. After the surgery, though, she rebounded again.

A year later she would encounter yet another hurdle, excruciating chest pain (angina) due to clogged coronary arteries. I watched her pain progress to the point where she could barely bring her fork up to her mouth or drink from a coffee cup without crushing discomfort. All my efforts to convince her that she needed help met with resistance.

My mother returned to her summer home on the New Jersey shore, where she was immediately hospitalized. Eventually, she unhappily agreed to open-heart surgery in Minnesota.

After her recovery, my mother insisted on returning to Florida. She wanted her independence. I later learned that Marion had done a heroic job of nursing my mother back to health. The struggle for a year of re-

newed life remained a tightly guarded secret between the two of them and testified as much to Marion's loyalty as to my mother's fortitude.

All of this went through my mind as I watched my mother doze off on that muggy December night in Florida. After pulling the covers over her, I returned to her apartment to sleep. Marion, spry for her 79 years, gave me a bear hug and a wet kiss and began sobbing from relief that I was finally there.

The next morning, after another visit with my mother, I called her cardiologist, who dropped the bomb: "Peter, your mother's breast cancer has spread to her liver." I was stunned, still harboring notions of my mother's immortality despite the fact that she was 73 and very sick. I had a sense of finality, the feeling that her suffering was coming to an end. She had insisted over the years that if she had widespread cancer she wanted *nothing* done and that she would go to a nursing home.

I drove her Cadillac to the hospital, smiling at the things she kept in it: a little striped pillow she liked to use during dialysis, medical journals, an umbrella. I met with the gastroenterologist who had discovered the spread of her cancer. As we looked at the liver scan on the screen, something I had done many times as a practicing physician, I suffered at the thought that those dark spots were in my own mother's liver. I recalled having had the same emotion a year earlier, prior to the by-pass, when I had seen her angiogram. At least then there had been hope.

As I looked at the pictures that were, in a sense, her death sentence, I decided not to tell her yet. I knew that if she continued dialysis, there was a good chance that a catastrophe might occur. That her heart was failing made each treatment more dangerous. I feared she would have a cardiac arrest, which could lead to something my mother opposed as much as a nursing home—being kept alive via technology.

I knew that she had to know the truth, and I thought the best person to tell her would be her cardiologist. He could break the news while holding her hand, sitting at her bedside in her comfortable apartment like some physician of old. Once dialysis was stopped, as I decided it should be, I knew that worsening renal failure and coma would be one of the least painful ways to die. My mother would know this too, and the less appealing alternatives as well. I knew my decision would be hers too.

Once we were home, I began preparing for what I suspected might be a long siege. A nurse had suggested that I contact the local hospice program. It would provide nurses to help us deal with the physical and emotional needs of both my mother and the loved ones in attendance at the death watch, as I came to call it.

I asked my mother's cardiologist if he would come up to the apartment and break the bad news. He said, "You tell her. You are her son. It's best for you to do it." As a way to enlist all the personal support I could find before telling her, I began calling all her relatives and friends with the news, so that anyone who wanted to could call or visit her.

Sitting in the living room, her pince-nez down on her nose, a magazine open on her lap, the azure ocean outside dotted with boats, my mother said, "Peter, are you telling me everything? Why are all these people calling me?"

"Mother," I said, "your cancer has spread to your liver. That's what the liver scan showed." I leaned over to take her in my arms.

"Oh, I thought that was what was going on," she said, making an effort to smile but looking instead as if she had been victimized by life once again. "I'm glad you've told me," she said quietly. "I did want to know."

I couldn't control my crying—that is, until Marion came in from the kitchen. She sensed what had happened and brought us out of our funk with, "Oh, you two silly people. Lydia, can I get you something cold to drink?" Then she made an incredibly silly face. My mother looked over her glasses and said, "That dress looks so nice on you, Marion." Marion lifted the hem to well above mid thigh and said, "Don't I have fabulous legs for a 79-year-old?" We both laughed until the tears flowed again, forgetting our pain for the moment. Marion and my mother hugged and cried.

For the next three weeks I was embroiled in a power struggle in which well-meaning relatives informed me that I was killing my mother by not continuing her dialysis. They had not been as lucky as my mother was in escaping the Holocaust. They had survived the Nazi camps and brought a survival-at-any-cost mindset to bear on my mother's decision. They believed that anything and everything must be done to save her, regardless of the suffering she might endure. One relative, who was like a daughter to my mother, cornered

her with the door closed and, awakening my greatest fear, tried to convince her to restart dialysis. Fortunately, she never wavered from her final decision.

Each night we offered my usually ascetic mother whatever her heart desired: Chinese food, big burgers, caviar. As our vigil continued, dinner time became like a condemned prisoner's last meal. Nonetheless, out of habit, my mother still ate like a bird, while those around her gorged to make up for her limitations. We tried to look like we were happy.

Every day a stream of relatives, tennis buddies and friends, even the maintenance men from her building, came to say good-bye and pay their respects as my mother held court from her bed. This afforded time for me to make calls and visits essential to understand and finalize her affairs. With sad resolve, my mother, who had always been guarded about her finances, now freely signed documents turning over her apartment, checking accounts and everything else of importance to me.

These were all matters that should have been handled long before, but my mother intentionally had neglected them. She felt that she could best handle her money. She also was determined up until the end to keep her assets from falling into the wrong hands. My mother tried to stay completely self-reliant even as her physical stamina waned. She had invested with a number of brokers so that none of them would know what the others held in trust for her. Fortunately, several relatives had recently convinced her to draw up a living will.

Rugged individualism and personal survival were the central themes of my mother's life. I thought of her graduation certificate from the University of Prague Medical School, complete with swastika, a symbol of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. In 1939, the fact that her brother held dual citizenship there and in America had allowed my mother and her parents to flee Hungary.

The stories of the anti-Semitic riots in Prague while she was in medical school and the intrigue required for her to stay in America on a temporary work visa became family legend. She and her parents fled Europe with only the clothes on their backs. Her brother, with characteristic shrewdness, called in a favor from someone else whom he had helped so that his sister could marry for convenience, extend her visitor's visa and later annul the union.

When my father left for the war a day or so after my birth for what would be a two-year stint in England, my mother supported us with her medical practice while she and my grandparents took care of me. Five years later, my father contracted polio while we vacationed in Provincetown, Mass. Although technically it was forbidden to transport anyone with a communicable disease across state lines, my mother had my father flown to New York Hospital so he could be kept alive in an iron lung. Throughout the difficult two years that followed, she practiced medicine, looked after a rambunctious child and almost daily made the tedious 30-mile drive to New York from our home in New Brunswick, N.J., to make sure my father was getting proper care.

Now that she was off dialysis, every day seemed a new test of my mother's fortitude. It was anybody's guess how long she might last. Every time I was convinced that this day would be her last, I would see her recover. There she was, weakly walking on Marion's arm to the living room. When I looked in, she would seem to be either reading or nodding off.

The hospice nurses who called on us helped me understand that it was acceptable to want it all to end, to want her to go peacefully and painlessly. In my practice, I had legally prescribed compassionate doses of morphine to patients with terminal illnesses who were in great pain. Instead of writhing in agony, they had rested comfortably before slipping into coma. It was another matter for me to want it all to end for my mother.

There were the daily phone calls from relatives who insisted on visiting, speaking with my mother or getting an update on the vigil. It was very difficult for me to say, "Well, folks, she's not dying as rapidly today as yesterday." It's just that dying is the antithesis of usual illnesses. Waiting for a loved one to die is not exactly what modern medicine, with its transplants, artificial joints, *in vitro* fertilization and intensive-care units is all about.

The chance for my mother and me to be alone while there was still time was vital; we needed to review and mend our early stormy relationship. Surprisingly, for the first time in my life, when my mother became hypercritical or angry, I remained calm. I realized that her thoughts were most likely affected by toxins from her renal failure.

As she slipped into intermittent coma, even the simple act of shifting her position could elicit agonizingly painful expressions. Once, after I made an effort to prop her up on the pillows, she lashed out at me. I naturally recoiled, but then accepted and excused her anger. She looked up and surprised me by smiling tenderly and saying, "I guess I was pretty hard on you while you were growing up, wasn't I?"

I began crying and lay down in the bed with her, holding her closely and sobbing. "It's okay," I cried, "you were just fine, Mom."

As the death watch continued into the third week, I found being separated from my wife and children especially difficult. My mother apologized but said she didn't have the patience for them to be around. She also may not have wanted them to see her declining.

My wife and children initially stayed at a nearby hotel until I thought my mother was no longer conscious. After a night together in the adjoining guest room, with each child up and crying at least once, I tiptoed into my mother's

room, believing she was finally in a coma. "It was the worst night of my life," she moaned.

"Why?" I asked. "Were you in a lot of pain?"

Without flinching, she groaned, "Your children kept me up all night." Her honesty filled me with guilt, even though her answer seemed very funny, and I had to suppress a laugh. My 1-year-old, Gabriella, crawled all over my mother's bed, drawing the tenderest of responses from her. My 5-year-old, Bria, was at once curious and timid as she watched my mother hobbling along. She was unable to understand why her grandmother was so weak.

As my mother weakly limped to the bathroom, the back of her gown fell indecorously open, exposing her thin legs. Her skin now hung slack over bones depicted of muscles (she had been a distinguished athlete throughout her life). I remembered what a delight it had been for my father, forever my mother's coach, when she had won the Fort Lauderdale, Fla., 65-and-older tennis championship.

As Bria watched my mother's slow journey to the bathroom, Susy and I had to stifle our laughter at my daughter's seemingly irreverent jokes about Grandma's "tushy."



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Lydia's Last Days

By the third week, the end seemed near. Although my mother was still breathing, I could not rouse her from sleep. I went to the kitchen to phone the relatives with the news; then my mother, ghostlike and faintly smiling, appeared at the door. Holding onto the door jamb, she announced that she had come to make *palacsintas*, Hungarian crepes that she and I both remembered I had loved as a child.

Now I was at a loss as to how to explain that my mother, who was supposed to be in a coma, was sitting in a kitchen chair with one leg propped up on the oven to support the arm with which she held the skillet and flipped the pancakes.

Christmas was now less than a week away. Marion panicked, as much from the impending moment of my mother's death as from the fact that, at 79, this might be her last chance to share Christmas with her family. I knew I would miss both her innocent comic relief and her physical and emotional help. She had slept in my mother's room on the adjacent twin bed and catered to her every need.

My mother's recovery was short-lived. By the next day she could no longer make it to the bathroom or balance on the commode. The hospice people helped me locate a 24-hour nurse to be in her room—as much to alleviate my own discomfort with her approaching death as to handle her medical needs.

The day my mother died was beautiful, with perfect temperature and a wonderful sun. My mother simply stopped breathing and passed away quietly. All my tears had been shed, and everything that I could do to resolve my personal feelings about my mother had been done. The undertakers from the funeral home came and gently removed her body before its final journey back to New Jersey, where she had specified she wanted to be buried—next to my father, her brother and her parents.

It was a year later, at the unveiling for my mother's gravestone, that I felt my body racked with uncontrollable sobs. I was surrounded by faces from an era I had long ago left behind. My parents and I had been separated geographically and had had our share of differences, but now, despite my wife's and children's presence and comfort, I felt very alone. At 43, I realized I was an orphan.

Our three weeks together as my mother slowly died when I was more the parent and less the child erased a struggle I had felt up until then. We gave each other forgiveness and I could reveal vulnerability to my mother once again. I would later finally understand a comment after the ceremony by a psychologist friend that a man's last word often is "Mother." ♦

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