

Regret

I'm scared of dying. Not afraid to be dead, just scared of dying. That long process where mind separates from body and all that once was is lost. It makes me feel uncomfortable, awkward. I like to be in control. But you can't do that with everything, can you? I've witnessed firsthand the turmoil of a dying woman as she struggled to jigsaw together the names and faces that floated before her. Watched as her tongue fought to form the sounds her mind spoke. And cried as her eyes searched mine for some sign of recognition, only none could be found. It was her eyes that had changed, not mine.

I never thought I'd be one so easily affected by death, always believing it to be a completely natural process we must all face, at some point. But this level-headed attitude didn't prepare me for something seemingly unnatural — *choosing* to die. She had been ill for years, struggling through every day for seven of them with complete kidney failure. But this was to be her eighth and final year of coping with her disease. A reprieve? No, an escape.

The hospital had become her home. A curtained-off corner of disinfected discomfort, choking flowers, faded bed sheets and awkward tokens of sympathy from those who couldn't deal with the guilt of being healthy. But it was never hers. We never referred to it as *her* bed or *her* ward, because she wasn't herself while she was there.

My granny was the strongest of women, bringing up seven children in the hardest of Caithness working class lives. Her deep wrinkles and work-worn hands spoke of a tired woman who had toiled away the years, but underneath was a different story. This tiny woman, eyes to my shoulders, was as independent as they come with a thirst for life. Seven years of illness, but only the last saw her not holiday in those places she always wanted to visit — Jersey, Guernsey, Devon, Cornwall, Ireland, Wales. It never stopped her; if anything, it was motivation.

She never wanted to be old, and it never suited her. It was all I knew her of her, yet I, too, saw the spark of youth in her eyes that my dad so much admired and the rest of us adored. Dependency was never an option for her. She muddled on, her steps becoming shorter and slower as did the day, where TV was the main preoccupation, though her garden still flourished under the resolute whim of her arthritic wrists. But a husband who committed suicide, a son she no longer saw, and the indignity of her illness forced dependency on her and brought her to this place — she was ready to die.

I first realised she was dying when she became one of those people. Those lost faces of the old and dying, with no one beside them and nothing to live for. Empty sacks, they stared into a lost past with no thoughts of a future, aware of nothing. The day she became one of them, has never left me. I relive it like a scene from a film: the stark, white corridor, walking past 'the taken', those lost souls, and, at the end, the door is ajar, light spills out and there she is, no longer the woman I knew and admired. She, too, is taken.

The leather sofa was sticky under my palm as I choked on my tears. The thud of my stricken heart drowned out her words: it couldn't be true. But it was. It was true. And it was one of those conversations you never imagine yourself having: the shock of being told someone you love is going to die — no, *choosing* to die — within the next two weeks is not something you can predict.

Have you ever had to mourn someone who isn't dead? Grieve for someone you can touch, someone you love when they are but a few miles away? I was too young. I know that now. Old enough to understand, I was too young to cope, too young to realise the consequences. It was the right decision, we all agreed. And it was *her* choice. She had tired of the endless boredom, the endless nurses and doctors with only bad news, and the horror of forgetting her family. She may have been alive, but she had no life. What she'd experienced was enough.

They stopped her medication.

She went home, to *her* bed.

She fought through nine days.

She went to sleep.

The shock was still there. It still bit into the back of my throat and stabbed at my eyes. She had been so separate from my life for so long, captive in that hospital corner, that it was hard to convince myself she was really gone.

But she still lives on, in her children, in the memories... in me. If there's anything she taught me, it was never to give up, never give in to the cliché or the diagnosis. Old age, illness and death may be inevitable, predetermined, but how you deal with them is not. No one can tell you how to spend your days, how to treat your illness or how to die. She chose life, holidays and her garden; she chose medication that gave her freedom for a time and then she chose to stop; she chose to die in her own bed, to reclaim her dignity and die in peace. She never did anything to please others, only herself. She was old and disgraceful, and one of the most remarkable people I've ever known. I only wish I could have appreciated that when she was slipping away from me.

I didn't go to see her before she died: I didn't see the point. She wouldn't have known who I was. But what if she had? What if she saw in my eyes all those memories of the life she loved? My biggest regret: too afraid to look death in the face, too much a coward to even try. There *is* a hole, a hole that grief created and regret now fills. I was too young to realise the importance of that one last visit. Too young to understand how it would affect me, now. I wish I could have been brave.

I'm scared of dying, that long process where mind separates from body and all that once was lost, that process reducing you to a vessel for a tired soul, making even the strongest love falter in moments of fear.

I see her tired eyes searching... and I'm not there.