



You never get used to loss

Paul Rousseau

Palliative Care, Charleston, SC, USA

Correspondence to: Paul Rousseau. Palliative Care, Charleston, SC, USA. Email: palliativedoctor@aol.com.

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“Between grief and nothing, I will take grief”.—William Faulkner

Her husband sits bedside holding her hand and caressing her brow. She turns toward him, her eyes dimmed, her bones rising through pale clumps of flesh like tiny periscopes. *“I’ll hold on as long as I can, but I can’t hold on forever”*.

Tears leak from his eyes as a guttural sob rolls up from his belly. He anchors his cane, heaves himself into a standing position, bends over the bed, and kisses her on the cheek. Then, he leans to whisper in her ear. *“Don’t you die, you hang in there. You never know what’s going to happen. God works miracles”*. His legs quiver and he collapses into a chair. He is 87 years old, and she is 85; they have been married 65 years. Their only child, a daughter, died years ago. He has dutifully cared for her alone for two years, through chemotherapy, two surgeries, and multiple hospitalizations. He has bathed her, dressed her, fed her, toileted her, and put her to bed, and now he is weary and careworn.

“I’m trying sweetie, I really am”, she says. The truth is she is going to die within hours to days. Still, she is selfless, her words a refuge of hope affording him a moment of comfort. He glances at me and offers a nod and an anemic smile. He wants affirmation she will live, despite my repeated counsel she is dying.

He gestures for me to move close and murmurs, *“Doctor, she’s the thread that has kept my life together, I can’t live without her, I just can’t. Please do what you can to keep her alive”*. His despair is profound; I motion for him to step into the hall. He tells her, *“Don’t you die, I’ll be right back”*, then grabs his cane and shuffles out the door. I cradle his shoulders, offer my support, and gently reaffirm that she is dying. He looks away, weeping. He hears my words, but

he does not hear them; however, he is not in denial, he is simply grieving. I hug him and inquire if he would like to have the chaplain visit again. He pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and dabs his eyes. *“No need for a chaplain”*, he mutters, *“but I want to tell you something. People think old folks are used to loss since we’re around death so much, but you never get used to losing someone, no matter your age”*. He stuffs his handkerchief into his pocket, hobbles through the door, and resumes his vigil.

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