

THE BIG BAD WOLF

by James Fry

My mother is dying in the bed next to mine. I wake up a dozen or more times a night listening for her last breath. They come less frequently now; a short suck in, followed by a long, gurgling exhalation that lasts for an impossible amount of time, then nothing.

I listen in the silent, half-light, the distance between us becoming greater and greater as I become more and more awake.

This is it. The moment we have both been waiting for...

Then, a sudden gasp of precious air and the cycle continues.

She has been dying for some time but we are now finally in the home stretch.

Hazel is dying because she smoked too many cigarettes for too long. She started as a teenager and never stopped once to catch her breath. Up until a week ago she was still able to turn on her side to have a smoke. After only a couple of puffs, she becomes violently sick. Because she hasn't eaten in over a week, there is only bile left, sometimes green, sometimes yellow.

After a cigarette, she feels awful for at least an hour and extra doses of nausea medication are required. Hazel has always enjoyed a nice smoke, but she is fast approaching her last puff.

In these last days, she can no longer move at all and speaks only in whispers. She dips in and out of unconsciousness. Her body is shrunken, her face collapsed, her skin transparent.

We joke about our role reversal. She is a baby again and I am the parent. She wears diapers and is toothless. She is frozen in a fetal position, drinks only liquids from a bottle and wakes five times a night. Her speech is faltering and she communicates mostly with the expectant eyes of a child.

Death is birth in reverse. A full circle.

But birth is a day or two of intense activity. Death takes much longer. And involves more pain.

Every two to four hours I inject ever-increasing doses of morphine sulfate into her right leg. Atropine goes into the left leg to stave off the discomfort caused by waterlogged lungs.

I have long been an advocate of home births – I delivered both my sons at home – so when my mother chose to die at home I agreed to help. To my surprise, I have since discovered this is not a common practice. Most people opt

for Hospice, where teams of trained, professionals tend to your every need and the families of the dying come for short visits.

I have nothing but respect for the people who dedicate their lives to the comfort of others. For those who don't have supportive families, Hospice is an essential and wonderful service, but however compassionate and caring, they can never replace the loving support of family and friends. To die with strangers is to die alone.

By taking on parenthood we are accepting an intrinsic responsibility to care for our children, no matter what. Similarly, a fundamental contract exists between an adult child and an aging or dying parent. Check it out, it's in the small print.

Death remains our biggest, badest wolf. When I tell my friends I am helping my mother die, they freeze, offer their deepest sympathies, and run screaming into the hills. I can see the fear in their eyes. The word is out. My phone has stopped ringing altogether. I am sure my friends are well intentioned; giving me space, not wanting to bother me out of respect. But it also reminds me that people are ambivalent towards death and reluctant to get involved. It is other people's business, too personal, too serious, and too scary. One day they will have to face the monster, but they will deal with it when the time comes and not before.

Death has taken me by surprise also. Philosophically and intellectually, I have no problem with it. I have studied the great books. I understand the cycle of birth and death. I read my mother poetry about death and transcendence and give her advice from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* – no matter what happens, no matter what you see, always head for the brightest, whitest light.

Although I am able to talk endlessly about the metaphysical nature of death and dying, my understanding and acceptance is not enough to protect me from the tidal waves of emotion that wash over me from time to time. They come from nowhere, care nothing about theory or logic and hit me like a sucker punch.

Death is easy, loss is more difficult. All the theory in this world will not change the fact that in a few days, or hours, or minutes, my mother will surely die before my eyes. I will grieve, and in time, the grieving will subside and life will go on regardless, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it.

Death is the great equalizer. We are all as good as dead.
And all the money and power and love and kicking and screaming will make not a wit of difference.

A Theosophist friend of mine once said that learning to live is about learning to die. This makes more sense to me now and I firmly believe that once we have made peace with death, we can truly begin to live without fear.

Good advice, but for now it is time for another shot of morphine. And when death finally comes, we'll face it together.