

New Nonfiction by James Wells: "Signs"



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I count between my mother's breaths: *one-thousand one, one-thousand two.*

Thirty minutes ago, her breaths were one second apart, and an hour ago, they were less than half a second apart. In the next few minutes, I know the interval between her breaths will become even longer, and soon, they will cease altogether.

My mother's big, beautiful, brown eyes are now glazed over, her eyelids almost closed. Her mouth is half-open, and her teeth, teeth that had been pearly white for nearly her entire life, have yellowed, most likely because the care staff at the nursing home had not brushed them as often as she once had herself. My brown eyes, which many have said remind them of my mother's, stay fixated on her mouth and chest as I watch the gap between her shallow breaths grow longer.

As I put my face closer to my mother's and kiss her forehead, I recognize her smell. It's Pond's Moisturizing Cream, mixed with the scent of her hair and skin. The only sounds in the hospital room are my mother's shallow breathing, the clicking of the I.V. machine pumping antibiotics into her bloodstream, and the occasional whispered conversation between myself and our oldest daughter, Millicent, who was able to meet me here about a half-hour ago.

My mother lived a remarkable yet tragic life. Today is no different.

Despite the attentive care of a nurse and the monitoring of

all of the medical equipment, I knew my mother gave up her struggle fifteen minutes before any machine or medical professional did. I was able to detect the very slight change in her breathing before the monitors or staff. As soon as I noticed the difference from what I felt were struggled breaths to more relaxed breaths, I called the nurse. After checking my mother and the monitors, she told me there was nothing different about my mother's condition. To me, the change in her breathing occurred as clearly as the transfer in sound and rhythm of a muscle car shifting from a lower gear into overdrive. Her breathing, which seems more relaxed now, tells me that she has resigned herself to her death and is coasting on overdrive to eternity.

But this wasn't the first strange thing to happen today. About five hours ago, I was at a Delta Airlines gate at Bluegrass Airport in Lexington, Kentucky, waiting to board a flight to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I planned to meet my wife, Brenda, who was at a conference near there, and for us to embark on a thirtieth wedding anniversary cruise. We'd already canceled our trip once before when Brenda's mother became very ill, and this was our second try.

As I watched the first passengers move toward the gate to board, I received a call from my mother's nursing home in Versailles, Kentucky. One of the staff there told me, "We think your mother's bronchitis has flared up again, and to be on the safe side, we've admitted her to the hospital for tests." She suspected that my mother would be fine and back in her room at the nursing home in a few hours. Despite her reassurance and my eagerness to get on the plane, I still didn't feel right about it. My mother was treated at the same hospital the year before for pneumonia, so I called the hospital and asked for more information. My call was transferred from Reception, to Emergency, and then to my mother's ward. I was reassured when the nurse informed me she knew my mother from her previous visits. She told me my mother

might have pneumonia and that a round of antibiotics should knock it out of her, just as it did the year before. When I told her my predicament and pressed her for more information, she informed me that the worst-case scenario was probably an overnight stay in the hospital, and given my mother's present condition, I should not cancel my plans to go out of town. But I still felt uncomfortable about the idea of getting on that plane. I called my daughters Millicent and Emily. I also called my older sister, Kathleen, and my brother, Ora, neither of whom live in the state, and briefed them about the changes with Mother. They all said, "Get on the plane." I even called our Episcopal priest, Father Allen, who visited my mother at the nursing home. He told me the same thing. "Get on the plane. Do the badly needed, over-due cruise with Brenda." I called my wife, waiting in Orlando. Only she recommended forgetting the cruise and be with my mom.

I can't explain it, but as I was about to board the plane after I heard the last call to board, I changed my mind, convinced the Delta agents to get my already checked luggage off the plane, and rushed to the hospital, only twenty minutes away.

Just a few hours later, I am cradling my mother in my arms and watching her die. I hate to think how I would have felt if I had gotten on that plane and my mother died alone. If that was God's miracle, I know that it was intended more for me than it was for my mother.

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three.

Mother was a very bright woman, the smartest in her high school class, and graduated first in her nursing school class during World War II. Fifty years later, when my siblings and I admitted her against her will to an alcohol detox facility, the mental health professionals there measured her I.Q. to be very high. The medical and mental health staff there could never convince her that she had an alcohol problem. Sometimes

I wonder whether she really did, too.

We never heard my mother slur a word, never saw a stagger or stumble. However, the mountains of empty, opaque green and brown sherry and wine bottles in her basement made us wonder. I suspect the alcohol helped numb the pain of her overwhelming grief. Today, when I see the large trashcans full of empty beer and bourbon bottles and crushed beer cans in my garage, I wonder whether the same demons that haunted her might now haunt me.

She was an introvert, an avid reader, and in the last decades of her life, a hoarder and a recluse. She and my father were polar opposites. She was studious. He was not. She was a good writer and speller. He had to struggle with every word and sentence he wrote. She was always calm. He had a bad temper. She took her time and often made him late. He always had a lot of energy and wanted to get things done right away. They were so opposite that my father often wrote about how he felt he did not deserve to be married to my mother.

My mother was a widow at the age of thirty-eight. After my father's death in Vietnam, she never dated, went out, or even spoke to or about another man. For years after his death, my siblings and I would wake up in the middle of the night and hear her not crying—but wailing like a wounded animal, for my father. I never thought about the difference between crying and wailing, but those nights, I learned. Her crying and shedding tears in silence could have been a private communication to my father that she had not accepted his fate. But the prolonged, high-pitch scream of her wail was a mournful plea designed to convince the heavens to let my father come back from the dead. We would all eventually fall back asleep, wake in the morning, and pretend that everything was normal.

Despite the yoke of grief she could never escape from, my sister, brother, and I agree that she couldn't have done a

better job raising us. After my father's death, her only job, her sole motivation in life, was to take the very best care of us and give us the best possible educations. With my father's life insurance funds, she put us in some of the finest private college prep schools in the South. She helped us with our English, French, Spanish, German, algebra, calculus, and trigonometry lessons. She drove us to band, dance, swimming, wrestling, football, and soccer. She put all of her energy and resources into raising us and did nothing for herself. For example, in the forty-three years separating her death from my father's, she only bought three cars, the last one in 1972.

By the time my siblings and I all finished college and got our M.A.'s, M.S.'s, M.D.s, and Ph.D.'s, she knew she had accomplished her mission. Left only to the company of her grief, without us being there, she started to go downhill a little faster. My father's death broke her heart and destroyed her mind; she just kept it all together until we finished our education and started our own families.

We were kids, and awareness of mental illness was not as prevalent as it is today—and so we never recognized our mother's depression since our father's death. Had we known what we know today, had we been a little bit older, a little more informed, we would have encouraged her to seek help. The years of depression eventually led to her self-medicating with alcohol, which years later probably led to her dementia.

A few years ago, we had to put my mother in a nursing home after the assisted living community's management kept complaining about her behavior. She began acting as if my father was still alive and would do odd things, such as set an extra plate at the dining table and insist it was for Jack. The last straw for the management was when she packed her small suitcase, went down to the lobby, and told everyone she was waiting for Jack to pick her up in his car.

One of the toughest and most memorable days for me occurred when I took her for an eye doctor's visit. She was holding

onto my arm as I helped her up some steps. As she lovingly looked at me with her big, brown eyes, she said, "I'm so fortunate to have a husband as good as you." I faked a smile back at her and said to myself, "Shit, she now thinks I'm Dad." My heart broke as I realized that the primary foundation for her existence for over forty years was now cracked and crumbling away right in front of me. After being faithful to his memory, she had forgotten his death and the sacrifices the two of them have made. To this day, I have not made up my mind whether that statement from her was a blessing or a curse, for her, as well as for me.

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four.

My mother's death did not begin this afternoon. It started in 1965. I knew what killed her and what haunted her for decades. In addition to her grief and depression, it was not knowing why my father felt he had to do the things he did, as well as the mysterious circumstances behind his death.

It won't be long. It won't be long before my mother and father are together again. After being apart for over four decades, within minutes, she will be with him. And in a few days, her casket will be placed directly on top of his in a national military cemetery.

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four, one-thousand five.

How is she still holding on? Why doesn't she let go? As my daughter and I hold her and stroke her face, and with tears streaming down both of our faces, we whisper for to her to "Go to Jack, go to Jack."

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four, one-thousand five, one-thousand six, one thousand sev....

And still no breath. My daughter calls for the nurse. The nurse comes in, bends over, and places her stethoscope on my mother's chest. She says that Mother's heart is still beating. We wait...ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds. The nurse removes her stethoscope and stands up. Her actions tell us everything. No words are necessary. My mother is gone.

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Three days after leaving my mother's hospital bed, while going through her box of "important papers," I come across a note she had left among her financial records and insurance policies. There is no date on it, but knowing she wrote it on the back of a mimeographed assignment for a class I have not taught in twenty years, I suspect its date was around 1990. At that time, we lived within a half-mile of each other, and she would often babysit our youngest daughter at our house. I suspect she removed the assignment from the trash can in my home office. She would often leave notes on little scraps of paper all over the house when her memory started to fail.

The note reads:

Jack had written about how furious a certain Vietnamese colonel was at whatever Jack had said to him. I couldn't help but wonder at the time, when Jack was shot down, if that colonel might have had something to do with it; might have had connections with the V.C. – or somehow been involved – yet of course, perhaps not.

I think again of that moment at the eye doctor's visit. I now believe that she was telling me that day to assume my father's role and investigate his death's actual cause, as he would have, being a career military police officer and criminal investigator. The downing of the CIA plane my father was a passenger in may have been a random act by the enemy. It may have been an assassination order by someone in the National Liberation Front, the South Vietnamese government, or God

forbid, the U.S. government.

Signs pointing to what really happened could be anywhere.

I thought of the alcohol bottles in the basement. The screaming at night, when she thought we were all asleep. I thought of the mysterious force that told me not to board that plane, to be with Mother, and not go on vacation with my spouse. I thought of my own future, my own children, the way the past does not go away, and how the crimes and sins of the past persist, and haunt the present.

Right there, holding my mother's note, the clue she left hidden in the tragic wreckage of our past, I make a promise to myself that I will do everything I can to uncover the truth. I will learn the truth about what killed my father, and that killed my mother—before it kills me, before it kills my family.