

Returning

“I did not come to America to die,” he had decided. Dad moved to New York City for a new life. Dad returned to Adoor to die.

Unlike during family trips to India – where overstuffed extra-large suitcases threatened to unburden themselves of Dove soaps, Hanes socks, and all kinds of gifts for uncles and aunts – I now grow tired simply from holding my carry-on after the nearly 24 hours of travel. As sweat trickles down my back, I realize that I will need to wash my few sets of clothes often here. I’ve left my white coat in New York.

“Nobody called for a doctor,” he shouts at me when I reach my aunt’s house and find him heaving with exhaustion while watering the potted jasmines. “If you had planned to take me back to New York with you, no need to try that with me.”

After a week in Adoor, I start to form a routine that is somewhat equal parts suitable to me and unobtrusive to Dad: wake up, take a shower, help Dad apply his cataract eye drops, remind Dad to eat something, hang around near the kitchen and occasionally help my aunt with cutting the vegetables or retrieving curry leaves from the yard, beg Dad to please try to eat at least once today, play with my nieces and nephews when they return from school, try to learn some Malayalam from my cousin when she returns from work, take a plate of food to Dad’s room after dinner and watch as he eats at least five bites (exactly five is what he has agreed to) so that he won’t take his evening medicine on an empty stomach.

“I came here to spend time with you,” I told him when I once tried to organize a day-trip for us. We haven’t taken any day-trips so far. “Let a dying man relax at least once in his life, won’t you?” he responded.

One morning, I change up my routine and sit on the floor in Dad’s room before he has

woken up. I watch his belly rise slightly with each breath, and I see that the creases across his forehead have grown shallower, as if sleep has quietly, temporarily, relieved him of his pain. I assume he has pain. He doesn't tell me that, of course. After a few minutes, perhaps hearing me shift position, he blinks awake and immediately regains his characteristic look of unflinching judgment. "Stop staring like you're trying to memorize me," he says. "I'm not dead yet."

A couple weeks after that, Dad is no longer allowed to lock his room when he goes to take a nap. He aspirated while asleep and my uncle-in-law had to break down the door when we heard him wheezing. I take a couple blankets and a pillow to his room to sleep on the floor beside his bed overnight. "Want a front-row seat to the action, huh?" he asks. During the night, Dad does not sleep much, repeatedly waking up, gasping for air. Sometimes when he does get to sleep, I hear him dully scream, attempting to break through the haze of a nightmare he seems to be repeatedly having, but he never wakes up at these moments. And I don't try to wake him up, thinking it better for these nightmares to remain locked inside sleep and unable to be remembered.

I begin going through Dad's belongings. First, I am stacking his books on the bedside table, so he can more easily grab what he wants without having to get up. Then, I am organizing his clothes, keeping a few sets folded in his room, but mostly removing the rest to the guest room, where I had initially stayed, to make some more space in his room for the doctors and nurses who now frequently make home visits to see him. Sometimes, the doctors try to involve me in their planning when they learn that I am one of them. But Dad shuts that down. "What does she know that you or I cannot already tell? I'm on borrowed time. I watched the start of her life. She is here to simply watch the end of mine."

Our routines continue to settle in, only to have to be wordlessly dismantled and refitted, again and again. I begin reading aloud the newspaper in his room each morning, something he enjoys listening to but no longer has the stamina to peruse himself. Dad stops watering the jasmines each evening, but insists that now I must make sure to see to this every day. One night I awaken to notice that he has not even tried to sleep, but is sitting in the rocking chair, watching me. “What are you looking at?” I ask. “My child,” he says. Who exactly is trying to memorize the other, I think to ask, but I don’t.

Dad still enjoys walking, though. “By myself, not with you,” he has made clear. But since he has fallen a few times even while at home, I walk behind him. I leave about ten feet, enough space so that he doesn’t have to hear me breathing but not too much space that I wouldn’t be able to sprint forward to catch him if he started to lurch backwards.

As we walk, I count down the passing houses and gates. Here is where the nearest doctor lives, faster to reach by running than by car from my aunt’s house. And a few houses further down the road, you have to be careful walking underneath these mango trees, since the mongoose sometimes dislodges ripe fruit that crashes onto the ground if you are lucky, or onto your head if not.

Occasionally, Dad stops, his eyes closed, and he leans on the nearest gate or tree to steady himself as his body shakes with wheezing, the start of a coughing spell that usually lasts about a minute these days. These fits used to be major events when I first saw them happening. But now they pass without occasion. The uncertainty of whether Dad will stop to regain his breath has meshed with the certainty that one day he will not.

Now here is where I ask him to start winding down before he passes out on the road, something Dad used to argue about but now has quietly accepted and incorporated into his route.

As Dad turns around and walks back in my direction, I am no longer confident Dad will always return when he leaves.

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