



What to Do About Mom

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Mom lay comatose on the hospital bed—head tilted back on the pillow, eyes closed, mouth open, nose pointed at the ceiling. Only her chest moved—slightly—when she took a shallow breath. In fact, it seemed as though each tentative breath might be her last.

Her skinny arms were bruised from puncture wounds, where nurses had tried to find a vein that wouldn't collapse. A successfully placed needle had, finally, been taped to the back of her wrist, with the plastic tubing connected to a saline drip. Another tube, a catheter, ran from

under the sheet to a urine collection bag hanging on the bed rail. And yet another, oxygen, circled her ears and looped under her nose, with two little prongs pointing up into her nostrils.

Poor Mom. Her hair was frizzed and matted, her lips were chapped, her liver-spotted skin greenish in the florescent light. If she could have seen herself, she would have been appalled at her appearance. She'd always been a beautiful woman, even as she aged. With a sigh, I picked up the sponge-cube-on-a-stick thingee and dabbed at her dry, cracked lips.

“If I ever get like that, just shoot me,” said my brother. Logan was a no-nonsense rancher with rugged features, a workman’s tan, and a faint aroma of manure.

My sister frowned. Sheila didn’t like Logan’s forthright approach to life, what she considered ‘brutal.’ Sheila much preferred that everything be nice and pleasant, genteel and polite. She didn’t watch the TV news for that very reason.

Just then the doctor came in, followed closely by the Hospice nurse, Dale. I liked Dale, despite his tendency to preach a bit. I’d heard he took a 50% cut in pay to work for Hospice. I admired his commitment and his obvious caring.

Dr. Harkins flipped through Mom’s chart. “Vitals look fine,” he mumbled, as though to himself. He often seemed distracted to me. But then he’d nail you with a piercing stare, all focused and intense. It was like a light switch had been flipped.

“So,” said Logan, “how long’s she got?”

“Hard to tell. She could hang on for days or weeks or . . .” He drifted off, nebulous. “These cases are, um, tough to predict.” Abruptly he bent over and thumbed one of Mom’s eyelids back. He seemed to be looking inside to see if anyone was home.

“I’m sure it’s just temporary,” Sheila asserted. “She could come out of it any time, right? Isn’t that what you said?”

“No telling,” Dr. Harkins muttered. Then he straightened up and looked around at the three of us siblings with that unsettling intensity. “But I’d prepare for the worst, if I were you. The likelihood of recovery is virtually nil.”

Sheila sucked in a sudden gasp. Not what she wanted to hear. And it certainly wasn’t sugar-coated.

Dale stepped over and put his arm around her shoulders for a few moments.

“So all this,” said Logan, waving around at the monitors and the IV stand and the stomach feeding tube apparatus and the other medical paraphernalia, “is just a big waste?”

Sheila flared. “It is not a waste! She’s our mother!”

“Look,” said Logan. “There’s lots of other people who could use this medical stuff. People who could benefit.”

“Mom can benefit.”

Logan rolled his eyes. “All I’m sayin’ is, at three grand a day, what’s the point?”

“Money doesn’t matter,” Sheila said. “Don’t you care?” Her lower lip started to tremble. I sensed another round of sobbing coming on.

Logan looked annoyed. “Of course I care. But why blow her life savings just to prolong her suffering? What good’s it doing her? Money may not matter to you, but I sure as hell could use some.”

Sheila’s eyes slitted. “You greedy bastard. You want her dead so you can—”

“Uh,” interrupted Dr. Harkins, “I’ve got to continue my rounds.” He gave Dale a laser look that said ‘take over’ and hustled out of the room.

But before Dale could open his mouth, Logan blasted, “She’s already dead! Don’t you get it? She’s gone. All that’s left is this . . . this body. This mechanism. Why keep it going?”

“She is not a mechanism. She’s my mother.” Sheila turned to me, beseeching. “She’s not dead. Tell him. Tell him she’s not dead.”

Caught in the crossfire, as usual. I was the middle child, the mediator. All my life I’d been the buffer between my older sister and my younger brother. “Well,” I equivocated, “technically she’s not dead—there’s still some brain activity—but I can see Logan’s point of view as well.” I was good at equivocating. “What do you think, Dale?” I was good at passing the buck, too.

Again, Dale didn’t have a chance to open his mouth.

“You see?” Sheila crowed to Logan. “She’s not dead. There’s brain activity.”

“Not much,” growled Logan. I could tell he was getting pissed off. He had that dangerous glint in his eyes.

Finally Dale said something. “There’s more to life and death than, um, chemical and electrical and biological processes. Perhaps there’s a reason your mother’s spirit hasn’t left yet. We just don’t see the big picture.”

Sheila was riveted. She respected Dale and hung on his every word.

To Logan, philosophy was all bull crap. What counted was what was real. “Looks to me like her spirit’s been gone for days. I say, give her some extra morphine and get it over with.”

Sheila was horrified. “You’d murder her?”

“It ain’t murder. It’s—what do they call it—‘assisted suicide.’ It’d be a mercy killing. Like puttin’ down an old dog that’s sick and sufferin’. Shoot, I’ve put down lots of animals.”

“Mom’s not an animal.”

Logan sighed. “Sure she is. We’re all animals. We eat, we—”

“You’re so gross. You may be an animal, but the rest of us are spiritual beings.” Sheila

peered down her nose at him smugly, proud of her witty come-back.

Logan looked like he wanted to haul off and smack her upside the head.

I figured I'd better step in. "The point is, is Mom suffering? Would she be better off, um, letting go and, you know, going to the light? Joining Dad and her folks and everybody? Or is there, like Dale said, a reason she's hanging on?"

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Logan shook his head and stared down at the floor. He'd obviously decided to let me try to placate Sheila, as I'd done so many times before.

Finally Sheila said in a small voice, "Maybe she's scared." It was her own fear of death coming out, it seemed to me.

"Maybe she is," I said, taking her hand. "But she doesn't have to be afraid. Right, Dale?" Passing the buck again.

"Right." He turned toward Sheila. "She'll be going home. Safe and warm and free. God's love is all-embracing."

I knew I could count on his inner preacher stepping up to the plate. "Going home," I echoed in my mellowest voice, trying to underscore the tone of safety and love, trying to make death sound like a good thing, a desirable thing. Maybe it was—who knows?

Sheila sniffled—a good sign. I wanted to help her grieve instead of clinging so desperately to the empty hope that Mom would suddenly sit up and say 'good morning.'

As though everything were now settled, Logan said to Dale, "So, you gonna give her some extra morphine or what?"

Sheila gagged and her knees buckled. I steadied her with an arm around her waist.

Dale cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Why not? It ain't legal?"

“Legally it’s a gray area. There are some court cases, but . . . Basically, I can’t do it on moral grounds. It’s not my decision to make. It’s God’s.”

“Oh.” Logan looked deep into my eyes. He might as well have said it out loud, that if it were his decision, there’d be no hesitation. Then he glanced at Sheila. “So, legally, what if the three of us came to a decision unanimously to, um, give you—or some other nurse—the okay to, uh, go ahead and give her an out, could you—”

“What?!” Sheila was flabbergasted.

Dale shrugged. “I wouldn’t do it in any event—and nurses generally have to follow doctor’s orders—but there could be a doctor out there who might be sympathetic. As to the legal ramifications, I really don’t know. Since you’re the beneficiaries of her estate, it might seem, um, self-serving. On the other hand, if your mother has a living will, or if any of you were appointed as a guardian or had medical power of attorney or something—I don’t know. You’d best consult an attorney.”

Logan looked at me with raised eyebrows.

I shook my head. “No living will that I know of.” I do wish Mom had signed a living will, but even then, it would only have addressed stopping treatment. That would have helped with the feeding tube—a major issue. The issue of euthanasia was still on the table, however, and as far as I knew, wasn’t included in a regular living will.

“You can’t be serious!” exclaimed Sheila.

I turned to her. “What would Mom want? What if she wants to go, but the body won’t let her, ’cause it just keeps on pumping blood and whatnot.”

“Like a mechanism,” said Logan.

Sheila stiffened.

I shot Logan a warning glance and he resumed staring at the floor. “The problem is,” I continued to Sheila softly, “Mom can’t communicate with us. We don’t know what she wants. So what are we supposed to do? Keep on, um, utilizing resources to keep her body functioning? Resources that other people need? Would Mom want other people to suffer on her account?”

Tears brimming, Sheila shook her head minutely.

“So what are we supposed to do?”

“I don’t know,” she wailed.

The truth was, I didn’t either.

