

## Witness

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I had only ever seen one person die before. I mean, really see them die. Last gasp, and all that. Thirty years of doctoring, and witness to only one death. Until now. Now it is two.

Not that I'm some sort of demi-god super-doc whose patients never die. Of course my patients die. For some, I have had the privilege of midwiving them on their final journey. For others, it was all too sudden and all too unexpected. It's just that I never actually saw them die.

I saw their struggle with life. I tried to stem the tide, spit into the wind, keep my finger in the dyke, push the shit uphill, swim against the rip. But as my wise grandmother used to say, "Mein lieber Gott vergisst niemanden." My dear God forgets no one. Despite the best efforts of modern medicine, nature still wins out in the end.

There had been the timed and documented moments of death in the hospitals. The failed resuscitations. But did I see these people actually die? I don't think so. They were already dead by the time the emergency pager went off. We couldn't bring them back to life. They were not Lazarus. We were not God. I did not witness them die. I saw them fail to rise. Just like nature intended.

Rod Stewart was belting out "The first cut is the deepest" around the time I was cut by a last breath for the first time. It was my first night alone as an intern on the male medical ward. James Ward. Spit alley, we call it. Full of public patients, diggers from the days when World War 1 veterans were still around.

Then, I was a young sapling with no firm grounding in the earth of medicine. I was scared. Shit scared.

5.30, 6.00pm, they all go. The day staff. The registrars. The other interns. Leaving me with the nurses, and with the enemy, as we used to call the patients.

The pager goes. An admission from Emergency. "Old bloke with anaemia. Probable bleeding ulcer. We're sending him up."

I enter the ward. Grab his file. Draw back the curtain which separate him from the 30 other inmates of James Ward. As I walk to the bed, a

man, grey hair, grey beard, pale face, wide eyes, groans an agonisingly long groan as he reaches a desperate hand towards me. Fear! As he dies. In front of me. And there is not a damned thing I can do about it. His final breath. My first death.

Thirty years later, a second death.

After hankering after it for my entire career, I am finally on a palliative care ward. No longer pushing the shit up hill, but helping to assist nature do her thing.

And she is remarkable. Such grace. Such dignity in her dying. Just as it had been in her life. She's ready to die. Not afraid of death. Tired from 20 years of breast and now ovarian cancer. Sad to be leaving her family. But ready to go. Definitely ready to go.

She'd said goodbye to her home. She'd said goodbye to her friends. She'd said goodbye to her daughter who lived overseas, and to all her grandchildren. She'd even said goodbye to her oncologist of 20 years – "I hope you don't feel I've let you down by dying after everything you have done for me."

I was blessed to be with her at the end. To watch her breath change. From laboured grunting to soft sucking. Slowing. Easing. Letting go. It was quite beautiful to watch. Watching her let go. Watching her go.

But which was the final breath? The last breath in? Or the blowing sigh a few minutes later as her body totally let go for the first time in her life?

It was an honour and a privilege to be there with her. To bear witness to the end of a good life.

It has changed me forever.

What a pity that it had to be my mum.

In honour of Ray Koppe, 28/2/1935 – 24/9/2010

"Our Ray of sunshine, forever in our hearts"