



Natural comfort

In the mountain town where I live, we often talk about the best way to die. On the trail or around the campfire, or late at night inside the house as the snow piles under the eaves, the gist is this: My friends want to die naturally. Leave me for the cougars, or let the grizzlies take me. Hypothermia is popular. Just hunker under a tree with a bottle of vodka on a winter night when the stars flicker close. Burning is not high on the list — too painful — but to be left outside, sooner or later, to feed the foxes or mulch the mushrooms, well, this is the dream.

And it is no joke. One friend keeps a scrap of paper folded in her pocket on hikes. *Do not revive me*, it reads. Others leave similar notes on their desks. Let nature be the boss, they say.

In theory, it sounds good. In reality, of course, it gets tricky.

Our neighbor, Wally, a crotchety bachelor in his 70s who has smoked for over 50 years, has been coughing for months, but he refuses to leave home to go see a doctor. Instead, he fabricates theories for why he feels ill — mercury in his fillings, toxicity in peanut butter — theories as good, I suppose, as any explanation save perhaps the roll-your-own cigarette that hangs like a fixture from his bottom lip. It hardly matters. The problem isn't just what the problem is. The problem lies in what the solution may entail.

Where will Wally go? What will Wally do? Without the firewood he cuts, the tulips he tends, his home, his neighbors, his routines, Wally will surely get sicker. We are all watching, and it is excruciating. Every so often someone loses it and pleads with him. There might be an easy answer, they say. You might find some relief. For God's sake, they cry, go see a doctor!

These are people, all of them, who have

said at some point, in some way: Leave me to the grizzlies. But the truth is that so-called "natural" death — whatever that means — is a whole lot easier to consider for ourselves than for those we love.

Early this spring, out of a population of 90 in town, five of us traveled to care for ailing parents. We who'd abandoned the rat race, gone back to the land and stayed to tell the tale, we who'd rejected pension plans, commutes and cubicles in favor of long ridge walks and ramshackle outhouses, now flew back, right into the mix, to Boca Raton and Kansas City and Pasadena, to spend long days under fluorescent lights, filling prescriptions, feeding, fluffing pillows, speaking softly, sitting by the bedside of mom or dad. And then sitting some more. We were glad to do it, passionate, even, about doing it, because we could feel it in our bones: There's something natural about giving comfort.

After all, we've known people who've drowned in mountain streams, who've fallen down steep switchbacks with a string of pack horses, who've flipped over cables into deep gorges while doing trail construction, but we'd never in a million years wish these deaths on our parents or our children or our friends or even dear crotchety Wally because, frankly, we cannot wish it on ourselves, we who are left behind. Not again. Not ever.

In March, I camped in the parking lot of the cancer hospital where my mother was having yet another surgery. It was neither the first time, nor the worst time, for either of us. For days following the operation, Mom had been nauseous with sharp gut-twisting pain, despite the fact that she hadn't taken so much as a sip of water in two weeks. The doctors tried more morphine. No improvement. They tried tough love, urging her out of bed, sick or not, to shuffle around the halls clutching the

IV pole. She got out of bed, tried to do what they told her: No change.

At last, a technician arrived with a tube. Once it was in place, up her nose and down her throat, my mother was immediately, well, flooded with relief. Green bile rested in the tube. A half-finished crossword puzzle sat in my lap. There was no place on earth I'd rather have been.

Truth is, there is middle ground between the hungry griz and the flashing lights of the ICU. Hospice workers have known this forever. Those of us who have staked our lives in the wilds take longer to catch on. We thought we were Robinson Jeffers, who said he would rather kill a man than a hawk. (Although Jeffers never specified *which* man.) It is humbling to discover that, in the end, we're all Dylan Thomas, pleading with those we love to rage, rage against the dying of the light.

When I returned home in April, to the green needly woods, the glacier-fed river running low, robins pecking at the ground, I seeped, grateful, into that other comfort, nature narrowly defined. One morning out jogging alone, I glimpsed the quick blond flash of a cougar tail, disappearing into the woods. If it happens that way, I told myself, so be it. But I won't lobby for it, not anymore.

When I die, I'd just as soon die surrounded by those I love. And while I live, I'd just as soon live like my fellow springtime travelers, all those the familiar faces bleary-eyed in the elevators of the cancer hospital, those who face the gentle night with agonized patience and those brave enough to usher them through, rather than champion one quick cold night in the forest. I'll offer comfort. And, when the time comes, I'll take it. □

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