

## Gone with air and with water

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Winner of the SRPC student  
essay contest.

‘Do you feel ready?’ I asked you. ‘Oh, yes.’ There were many other things I wanted to ask you that I didn’t. I wondered how it felt to know that you would die, to have more than just some vague notion that your death was coming, but to prescribe it a date and time. How did it feel, I wondered, to decide to die on a Tuesday. I thought of the great stoics, they had conquered the idea of death, so they claimed, and yet when death’s time came – when death was no longer just an idea – many of them were reported to have been afraid. You didn’t seem afraid to me. You and death had established a time, and you didn’t seem afraid.

You and I were different people. You were rugged. Your generation grew up with very little, and you, you grew up with next to nothing. You worked the fish plant, you played cards, you drank, you smoked; eventually, you had a family of your own, and you were proud. You loved your children as you did your grandchildren. Then, cancer.

I always thought that something happened when a person was diagnosed with cancer, something that irrevocably takes a ‘me’ and makes it a ‘me and my body,’ with the two then deemed forever at opposition with one another.

What cancer left for you was cruel, because you were no longer *you*, rather you were a man left alone in a body, scarcely able to get up from your bed.

Hence, you chose medical assistance in dying. In the short time you had left, we became quite close. I never told you, but I set an early alarm each morning. I made sure that once I had rounded on my in-patients, before going to clinic, we had ample time to talk. On Thursday morning, we got to discussing poker. ‘I was never much good,’ you told me, ‘but, it was always a good time.’ You used to wear goofy t-shirts to poker games, and your friends would laugh to the point of tears. I told you how I thought we all ought to live to the point of tears and you agreed.

Monday morning you gifted me a t-shirt, at the sight of which you couldn’t contain your laughter. ‘It’s for you to wear at a poker game with your friends’ and you beckoned me to take it. I did. You had worn it yourself over the weekend at a poker game you hosted with your family and friends while on a pass from the hospital. You told me that your drink and smoke had never tasted so good, and you were happy that such was the case because ‘tomorrow is the day,’ and you ‘couldn’t go out on a bad drink and smoke.’

Tomorrow, then, you would die, as you wanted. It was my first experience

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with medical assistance in dying. I felt like crying but, in some sense, it felt selfish, so I betrayed my own advice to you. I thought I ought to leave the tears to you and your family, so I refrained. In any case, you were happy.

It wasn't long until the storm came. It was a Friday, and I was scheduled to be off for the weekend. I stayed up rather late, mixed a drink of gin and continued to work on a short story I had been writing. It was a tumultuous night. At 3:00 a.m., the wind was steady, drumming on the apartment like a reveille and scant gusts pushed their way through closed windows, a whistle that reminded me of a trumpet – nature's call to action. I slept poorly.

Before 8:00 a.m., my phone rang, and I answered. Something about a code orange; 'we need all the help we can get,' I was told, 'there are houses being swept out to sea.' Hurricane Fiona had arrived at the coastal community of Port Aux Basques.

The main road was safe, but elsewhere water could be seen stretching up and over the streets. Some of the streets no longer existed. Many homes no longer existed. When one stepped outside, one felt as though it were a scene that was quite biblical, in the most terrifying sense.

The hospital had electricity. Some of the employees who had worked the previous night shift elected to stay and help, and some had no home to return to. Many of those who arrived in the emergency department were brought by authorities for safe shelter, although some were hurt by debris, and one had survived being swept away while evacuating. I worked that day in a

sort of sustained daydream, one that lacked the pleasantness of a reverie.

Things were different in the weeks afterward.

'My blood pressure has been out of control lately.' Then, in a sentence that followed, you'd tell me how you were living with family, or friends, because your home, and the perch it sat on, had disappeared. No wonder about your blood pressure, I would think.

'My sugars have been all over the place.' No wonder, I would think.

'I've been having headaches constantly.' No wonder, I would think.

'My shoulder has been bothering me.' Then, you'd tell me how you had spent the last week labouring to clean up the debris around what was left of your home. Yes, well, no wonder, I would think.

'My anxiety has been torturing me lately.' No wonder.

I listened to stories that were nearly unbelievable in the weeks that followed. Unbelievable in the sense that they seemed too tragic to be real. There was often little else I could do, so I just listened. Eventually, I left Port Aux Basques, having finished my rural family medicine rotation. It was my first-ever clerkship rotation. Things were much different in the community when I left it than they were when I arrived. I was much different too.

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