I Will Dance in My Aqua Gown! A Personal Reflection

Ann Mayher Durette as told to Bev Rosa Williams and Kathy Spero Medeiros

I LIVE MY LIFE AS NARRATIVE. Every experience is the stuff of a good story, and the stories get better each time they are told. Although my role in the storytelling will soon come to an end, my story will continue in the narratives of those I leave behind.

I have stage 4 colon cancer. I will not bore you with the details of a rogue cell multiplying and metastasizing, wreaking havoc with my GI system. It is a not good thing, but it is a thing that can bring about good.

I am a retired registered nurse and have seen my share of living and dying in the nursing home and elsewhere. I have made the decision to live the rest of my days without life prolonging or lifesaving medical interventions—no surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, intubation, or resuscitation. Just I and my tumors sharing the same body until the body can no longer hold us. I am not clinically depressed, and I am not in denial. I simply choose not to treat. I don't think it's an irrational decision, I really don't. I think it's a knowledgeable one.

I am a wife of 45 years, the mother of 4 grown children, and the grandmother of 9 grandchildren, ages 3 through 17 years. If I had done nothing else in my life, I would consider myself a success. We are a close family of nurses, teachers, and other medical professionals. My best friends are the girls I met in nursing school. I have my own personal care team. They don't always agree with my choices, but they have deferred to my decision to let nature take its course.

I handle the grandchildren with care. They are afraid of the unknown. I made them a promise that I would let them know when changes occur and signs of further decline emerge. Until further notice, however, I have reassured them that today is not different from yesterday, and tomorrow will most likely be as today. My dying will be gradual and there will be no dramatic drop into the abyss.

I enjoy weekly outings and regularly scheduled gatherings of my nursing school classmates. Most of all, I am content right here at home where children and grandchildren drop in and hang out daily. My self-prescribed comfort care consists of a recliner and a garden full of flowering plants, fish ponds, and toys for my grandchildren. My hospice medication kit is

in the refrigerator in case pain, breathlessness, nausea, constipation, anxiety, or any of a list of other distressing symptoms become present. It sits alongside the liquid nutritional supplement, which has become the staple of my diet.

I am right with God. I have received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick (formerly known as last rites) and feel strengthened by the spiritual nourishment. I am in a state of grace with a clarity that resonates powerfully in the face of death. The challenge is to remain so graced throughout the rest of my days. Those who know me cannot help but smile at the notion. I am, and will continue to be, a spirited woman!

As summer eases into autumn, I look forward to my son's wedding. It is his second marriage, but the bride's first time at the altar. Rightfully so, it will be celebrated with embellishment and grandeur. As the mother of the groom, my role is limited, but I will be featured prominently in the mother-son dance at the reception. These undoubtedly will be my last moments in the limelight, but I am determined to make them memorable. I will dance in my aqua gown!

I am ready to make my transition to what I believe to be heaven. My parents and infant son await me. What a joy it will be to hold him in my arms once again. I have my "going away" outfit ready, minus shoes. I will be laid out in a three-piece pantsuit with matching socks. Until then, I will continue to live, love, and laugh. On a good day, which characterizes most days lately, I see humor in the human condition. I laugh at the foibles of family and friends as well as the ironies of life. I laugh at the funny stories we tell about one another and the silly antics of daily living. Most of all, I embrace laughter as the single most authentic way to live out the last chapter of my storied life.

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