

The Socks

As a new Nurse Manager in an aged care facility, I was walking past the clinic room when one of the RNs said "I have just doxed you in". I was momentarily confused until she said "Ellen's family want to talk to you". OK, I thought, Ellen is close to death and the RN knows my background in end of life care. I talk to the RN about how she has known Ellen for the past 6 years and that it would probably be more meaningful for she to talk to the family because I had not met them yet. I would be happy for her to talk them through. "No..." she said slowly, "we thought you would be best". "No worries" I said looking at her intently, trying to understand her – was she really not ok to support this family and Ellen? Is it because she was too close to them? I bookmarked that thought and found my way to Ellen's room.

Ellen's daughter was sitting with her mum in the sun drenched room. Ellen was comatosed, shrinking and sinking into the bed. She was surrounded by flowers in vases, family photos and her favourite fluffy pink blanket. Ellen looked peaceful and beautiful, her skin translucent, her body shell like and still. Ellen's daughter was rubbing lavender cream into her mother's limp bony hands. Hands that had known long years of raising children, milking cows, washing in the copper and pumping water up from the river. We sat and talked about Ellen's life and her mothering. The great grand children's drawings and get well cards framed the edges of every surface, a testimony of her family's love. Her daughter told me that Ellen had grown up in across the river and farmed up further up the valley. Her north

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east room had views to both river areas and her daughter remarked how she loved this home for that reason.

Ellen was slowing and her breathing became more shallow. We went outside briefly and I talked directly about time being short and that I thought Ellen would die soon. The daughter said she had good support and had rehearsed this time over and over. The priest had been, Elvis was singing gospel and the funeral director chosen. Everything had been said and done. Now it was the waiting. We repositioned Ellen towards the window – I couldn't help but say "She is facing North" and her daughter smiled "Yes, she is going home".

Ellen died that night and all the things that we had spoken about had become script. Her daughter came in a few days later to pick up her mother's belongings and I watched some of the staff avoid her. Our eyes met and she came to me with a list of what she wanted. She wanted to donate a painting, a brand new walking frame and boxes of incontinence pads. I heard her plans and then said quietly "But how are you going?"

There was a wobbly moment and she looked at me desperately, clutching my arm. "I don't know what to do with her socks!" She started to shake and became distressed. "They are new and tagged" she hesitated "but nobody would want them!" I hesitated then too. I took a risk and a deep breath. "My grandmother died a few years ago and I didn't know what to do with all good new socks either", I offered. "What did you do?" her tears were starting to spill. I lifted up my trouser leg to show her my black and white striped socks with nan's name tag ironed on the side. "It is kinda nice to think about her when I put them on". I said

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sheepishly. "She would have hated me to throw them away". We both shared a smile about these two strong women who survived the Depression and would have darned over darned socks and have now left us with memories and their sock collection. "Thank you" she said into my hair as we hugged for the last time. "I am going to keep the socks too".