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ESSAY/PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

# Faith

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JAMES DETTE

Things were moving faster than either of us realized. On Friday, August 10, I took her to the doctor. She had weakened considerably, and the doctor arranged for her to go into the hospital immediately. We went home to get the things she would need, and then to St. Mary's Hospital, a few blocks away. We were met by the doctor at the room. Mom asked the doctor if he intended to give her an intravenous feeding. He said that that was his plan.

"No," she said quietly. "I don't want it."

"You don't understand," the doctor insisted. "You can't stay in the hospital unless we provide some therapy."

"I'm not going to have that needle stuck in me." She seemed to have made up her mind.

The doctor and the nurse conferred briefly and then he turned to her and said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Dette, if you don't permit us to provide the therapy, then you can't be admitted."

She turned to me and said, "I guess we'll have to go home." She thanked the doctor for his trouble, and we left.

That was it. The decision was made—a decision that individuals, families, and doctors agonize over for days; some prepare for it years in advance. She made it standing in the hospital corridor: "I'm not going to have that needle stuck in me." I knew what it meant when she said it. I was also sure that she knew what she was doing. We got into the car, parked in the Emergency Entrance, and drove home to the place where she wanted to die; "death with dignity," they call it now.

When we arrived at the house, she went immediately to her closet and took out a dress and a pair of shoes. "Here," she said. "these are the things that I want to be laid out in."

"Mom!" I protested, but to no avail.

"They'll be right here in this closet. And you tell Quinlan, the Funeral Director, that you want the

same arrangements that he made for Nell. Nell was my mother's sister.

Then she began to think about the burden she perceived that she was putting on me. I tried to assure her that it would be all right. I said that one of us would always be with her. I thought to myself that I would arrange for a nurse to be with her through the nights, when one of us might not be able to be in attendance. I knew that being alone was now her greatest fear. I prepared some lunch for us and then made some calls to set up the nurse for Sunday night; the equipment we would need arrived later that afternoon. All the people that I spoke to on the phone were quite helpful and solicitous. I had no idea of how much time Nana had. The doctor had offered no estimate. Such was the state of disbelief he had been in, when she decided to leave. I suspect that he fully expected that we would be back before too long. (He didn't know Mom too well.)

On a warm, clear August afternoon, we sat on the back porch. What do you do while you are waiting? We reminisced. It wasn't hard. Mom was always full of stories about her family and childhood. I asked her if she remembered any of the poems she used to recite for us when we were kids. We tried to recollect the titles: "Asleep at the Switch," "Schneider's Grocery Store," "Two Little Boys." "How about 'Asleep at the Switch'?" I proposed. She thought a moment then started out, "Tugging away at the sleeve of—"

"Wait!" I said. I went to the car for a cassette recorder that I used for dictating memos. Strange, I thought, I had years to do this and now that it's almost over. . . . She got through it. Maybe a few missing lines, but pretty much as I remembered it. And so we passed the afternoon. I still have the tape. Her voice is quite strong in spite of everything.

The anointing of the sick, I'd thought.

"I guess it would be all right," she replied when I asked. She had been anointed before at a communal service a year ago in our parish, as were many seniors, but this would be special. I called Father

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Bob at St. Nick's. He said he'd be there the following morning.

It was another cozy August day; we'd had some breakfast and were back on the porch. I had slept on that porch every summer from almost the time I can remember until the day I got married. Father Bob had just arrived and was talking to us about the sacrament. He was very gentle as he went through the ritual anointing. We then both received Holy Communion.

After he left we talked about the old days some more. She was tired, and I helped her back to bed. She turned to me and asked, "Jay, am I going to die?"

"Yes, Mom," I replied, matter-of-factly. Then, trying to recover, I asked, "Do you want to pray?"

"Yes."

We sat down together on the edge of the bed and prayed: "Our Father, . . . Hail Mary, . . ." and then, "Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place my trust in you." We sat still for a few moments, and then she lay down. Trust. That's what had sustained her all her life and was supporting her in her last days. The rosaries in the cellar by the wash machine (the beads were still hanging there when I looked), her novena booklets kept conveniently in the kitchen cabinet, the picture of the Sacred Heart on the mantle in the dining room, the signs of her personal faith—they were all buoying her up in her hour of need. She was not an outwardly pious woman. She didn't wear her religion for all to see, but her faith was unshakable. She had weathered Vatican II and approved of many of the changes, though she would occasionally lament some reform, saying that she hoped that she would die while she was still a Catholic. Never at a loss for words.

Evie brought the kids over for a Sunday afternoon picnic. The weather was still pleasant—Mom's one complaint, voiced with vehemence when we would have several days of heat and humidity, "Any more of this and I'll consider it a personal insult!" Well, the weather that August knew better. We barbecued

as usual in the backyard. Mom sat on the porch and watched the festivities. Every once in a while I would help her into bed for a little rest. As the afternoon drew to a close she was back on the porch. I told the children that we were leaving and that they should all say goodbye to Nana. I thought deep down that it would be their last goodbye but I couldn't bring myself to say it, even to the older ones. They each got hugged and Nana got "a feel of the buttons," and they left.

"I'm surprised that she lasted the night," the nurse reported when I arrived early Monday morning. "She's very sick." She gave me some instructions on what I should do to keep her as comfortable as possible and what to do if I needed help and then left. I called Evie. She arrived, and we alternated the vigil for the rest of the morning. Nana seemed half asleep, unaware of my presence as I ran my fingers through her hair; it was quite grown in now. Evie had left to arrange for the children so that she could spend the night. I stepped away for a moment to make another of the endless phone calls. When I returned she looked lifeless. I picked up her arm and it fell back.

"Oh, Mom," I said, embracing her and praying to God that she hadn't been aware that I'd left her for that moment. When death finally came I was still not ready for it. The only one ready was Mom; she had her dress and shoes picked out and her funeral arranged. But she didn't arrange the funeral mass; that I did. I'm sure she would have approved of guitars and all. We celebrated her life, then we buried her next to my Dad, not far from her parents and her brother, Will, and her sister, Mame. After the funeral we toasted her memory at the Brass Rail in Hoboken, a memory that lives through her faith and wit. As she used to quote her mother, my brother and I now quote her. If she were still alive she would be 100 years old this year. "Now that's what I call making a habit out of it," she would have said.