

The Benefits of Breathing

Ray woke up smiling, which, these days, his wife thought unreasonable. After all, he'd been declining. He might feel lightheaded standing up from the couch, fall, and Julie his wife would come running in with her short gray hair flying. He'd say, “No broken bones.”

“I don't understand why,” she said one night. “Don't you think it's time for a cane?”

“I'm a Midwesterner—strong bones from milk—and I don't feel old.”

This morning, still partly in a dream, Ray was golfing at St. Andrews in Scotland, his ball flying high over the rippled fairway and the golf course that had started golf. He'd been with a client, Gordon Marx, whom he hadn't seen or thought of in years, and they gazed at the northerly bay, sea grass near the shore. Ray had been a successful stockbroker in San Francisco, head of the international department, but it was partly because he loved doing things with his clients, such as golfing in Scotland or attending an opera in Italy. He loved people.

His dreams, lately, brought him an array of minor characters from his life – not his parents, not his three wives, not his three daughters (one from each marriage) – but he saw such people as his golfer friend John, the grumpy grocery lady from his childhood in Vancouver, and the kid Mike, who'd wiped his bloody finger on his gym T-shirt in P.E. in eighth grade. Add in the bearded Viet vet he'd once given five dollars to at a stop sign in San Francisco.

As Ray blinked awake with a black cat on one side of him, a Siamese cat on the other, he could only shake his head, wondering why his dreams lately couldn't be more entertaining. He understood he was dying, but why was it taking so long? Months. Couldn't the end be more interesting?

Ray reflected on St. Andrews. He'd beaten Gordon by eight strokes. These days, his game of golf, which had held up until just before age ninety, had evaporated completely. As he thought about it, his ninetieth birthday at the nearby Villa Restaurant might have been his last great day. From the hilltop eatery, he had soaked in the beautiful spring-green mountains of Santa Rosa, not a house or structure in sight.

His oldest child, Kathleen, then sixty-five, her back to him, sun in her hair, stared at a turkey vulture gliding high on the thermals. The bird of prey undoubtedly scanned for something dying. Kathleen turned back to the table, and, stepping forward in three swinging steps, her arms moving with a little Cuban action, made a cha-cha-cha.

“You've always been a good dancer,” said Ray. She'd once taught him the four basic steps to the dance, the first being to step forward-forward-forward.

At the table, Kathleen raised her champagne glass high. “To you, Dad.”

“To Ray, light of my life,” said Julie in a stunning green dress, also raising her flute. Ray noticed them both reflected in the glass he raised.

“To you two,” he said. “You've made my life especially worthwhile.”

“I thought I drove you crazy,” said Julie.

“I have lived with sweet you for forty years,” he said, clinking her glass. “Forty-one may be a challenge.”

He turned to Kathleen, raising his glass once again. “And to you and your siblings.”

“You know Erica's at a conference in Italy, and Suzanne's father-in-law—”

“Listen, I begrudge nothing. I'm happy you're here.”

“Better than mud-luscious Minnesota.”

In the nine months since that birthday, Ray had fallen, lightheaded, at least half a dozen times while standing or walking, and twice he'd tripped over one of his wife's five cats. He hadn't broken anything, but the falls beat up his face badly. Still, he smiled. What's the alternative, right?

These days, he wheeled himself around the house in a type of wheelchair where he pushed with his legs. Old age was like sausages left out in the sun too long, bloating, ready to burst. That's also how his ankles now appeared. He couldn't wear shoes anymore. Still, it wasn't painful. The end just seemed to be like an awkward stageplay where the playwright forgot why he wrote it in the first place. He figured, though, that Samuel Beckett knew what he was doing even if most people thought *Waiting for Godot* was pointless. Life was absurd, but you had to laugh anyway.

Old age also brought him breathlessness, a lack of concentration, and a loss of hearing so that his conversations with Julie, younger than he by twenty years, rarely went beyond four sentences, such as now, when he got out of the bathroom.

Ray: (*yelling from the bedroom*) Where are my shorts? (*She yells something back that he does not understand.*) WHAT?

Julie: (*louder*) What are you selling short? I thought you weren't trading anymore.

Ray: My shorts! My favorite gray shorts.

Julie: You peed in them yesterday. I haven't done the wash yet.

Ray: I'm going back to sleep.

He did sleep after he pulled on pants, as laborious an exercise as a half-hour in the gym used to be. He also could be disoriented. One time, waking up in his wheelchair, he was sure he was in a trailer, locked-in and abandoned. It was his home office, but he had recognized nothing.

The doorbell rang, and Julie shouted out, “I'll get it! I'm sure it's Suzanne!”

Suzanne? he thought. Why was she here from Wyoming? He shook his head a few times to return to the world. He wheeled himself into the living room.

“Hi, Dad,” said Suzanne, blond-haired and waving from the front door. Her smile seemed forced, which wasn’t like her. His youngest child had become a broker in his footsteps. She lived in Jackson, Wyoming, where there were three ski resorts and a tall, skinny husband who loved to ski with her. Working at an independent wealth management company, Suzanne and her chef husband Frankie had never had children. Two of Kathleen’s often flew to Wyoming to ski with Aunt Suzanne and Uncle Frankie. Ray had four other grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

To Suzanne he said, “What’re you doing here? I’m not dead yet.”

“Can you hear me?” she said.

With one of his blasted hearing-aids missing, he could not hear her clearly, but he made out her words and said, “Yes, I can hear you.”

Julie swooped into the room with a lemonade and a hug for Suzanne. The two women briefly peered at each other guiltily, and then Julie pulled Suzanne into the kitchen. Ray could make out Suzanne’s words, “Are you sure?” and he heard part of Julie’s reply, “He’s still a parent and a human being.”

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

“Thanks, Julie,” said Suzanne. “I’ll take Dad out to the sunporch.” She grabbed the handles and guided him across the living room to the former screened porch, now enclosed and air conditioned.

Suzanne stopped right at a picture window, which overlooked his ten-acre hillside vineyard. Affixed to wires and drip irrigation, the vines in straight rows glistened heavy with fruit, there at the end of the summer. Within weeks, St. Francis Winery would send workers to pick the fruit once it had attained a certain sweetness. He had worked daily on his vines up to age ninety.

Suzanne crouched beside him and looked into his eyes. “Dad. I have something to tell you.” The room was free from distracting noises, so he could hear her better.

“I can guess,” he said. “You love me, and you’ll miss me. You didn’t have to fly here for that.”

“Yes, that’s all true. I love you.”

“Circle of life, right?” he said. “It feels like a damn wall, right now, but I’m looking for the secret tunnel under it.”

“There’s something else,” Suzanne said, her eyes glistening, watery, even if her face remained calm. She’d always been stoic.

“What is it, honey? Divorce?”

She frowned. “No,” she said. “Why would you say that? Jimmy and I hang-glide together.”

“You hang-glide?” he said, worry in his voice.

“It’s a metaphor, Dad.”

“Ah. I like metaphors, but similes are better. You and Jimmy are like a pair of rocks skipping.”

She laughed. “Yes, Jimmy and I are like rocks skipping.” This seemed to have broken her concentration.

“Jimmy’s an artist with iron pans,” he said.

She nodded, then looked him in the eyes. “You know how Kathleen likes to swim?”

“Kathleen? What about her?” He fiddled with his hearing-aid.

“Swimming... Kathleen...” were the only words he got.

“Kathleen likes to swim,” said Ray.

Suzanne leaned closer to his ear with the hearing aid. “Yes, she did. Two days ago at her athletic club, Kathleen... drowned.” Suzanne took a big breath. “Apparently she had an aneurysm that burst in her brain.”

Ray felt he was falling, and he cupped his head. He realized he was safe in his chair. Would he black out? Suzanne’s voice cracked, and she shook her head, saying, “I guess it was fast. A lifeguard got her out in seconds, but she was gone.”

Suzanne now clasped him, and the light there in the sunroom grew brighter, blinding. He and his first wife had named their first child Kathleen for its Gaelic meaning, “pure little one.”

Pure. Purity. Pureness. He didn’t know if he said what he thought, but he wanted to say, “One’s children aren’t supposed to die before you.” Kathleen, little bundle of tiny blankets, her bassinet so white, his wife breast-feeding for the first time, my little joy – why, why, why?

He now floated in the Milky Way, not in a spacesuit as George Clooney was in *Gravity*, arms and legs scratching for a foothold. No, Ray felt himself hovering as in a hot tub, buoyant, somehow seeing and breathing. The only problem was, the bearded Viet vet he'd given five dollars to on a street corner now drifted next to him with a full body, laughing. “Thanks for the money, man,” said the man, whiskers white and long.

“Why are you here?” asked Ray.

Gordon, his former client from Scotland, floated in with a golf club. “Hoot, Mon!” said Gordon.

“Now come on,” said Ray. “You're not really saying such a cliché thing, are you?”

“You brought us here,” said Gordon. “Where would you rather be?”

Just like that, Ray returned to his Sonoma home, younger as he saw in the sunporch's mirror. Maybe he was sixty-five, Kathleen's age. The sun poked its face over the nearby mountains, casting pink on the overhead clouds, creating a strawberry parfait with the bluing sky. Soon the full sun gave a glamour-girl look to his grape vines, each leaf's edge highlighted with a golden color. A full moon floated in the sky just over the hills, opposite the sun. The valley, abuzz with the sound of flies, looked greener than he'd ever seen.

Right next to the house, the lawn's sprinklers burst on, offering umbrellas of wetness, filling the air with the revitalized scent of a recently mowed lawn.

A squirrel jumped from an oak branch onto his ruby-red barn, the squirrel's feet scurrying with the sound of loose chicklets.

At the window, the Siamese cat played with a fly that did not buzz.

The creak of a chair behind him made him twist around, and there he was in a hospital bed, rails up on the sides. Julie pulled the chair closer to the bed and took his hand, and she rubbed it as if it were Aladdin's lamp.

“Julie?” he said.

She didn't seem to hear him. She spoke to Suzanne, saying, “He's breathing faster. Does that mean something?”

He felt his other hand rubbed, and he turned. Suzanne struggled with a smile, gazing at him, her eyes glistening with tears. *Don't be sad*, he wanted to say as he felt strangely bright—and she nodded in release. Then he noticed: at the foot of the bed stood Suzanne's older half-sister, the departed Kathleen. She was as real as he remembered, wearing slinky dancing clothes as when she taught him the Cuban dance.

“Kathleen?” he said, and she padded over, offering her hand. Feeling limber, he pushed himself over a rail, stood up from the bed in his red pajamas, and took her hand. While there was no music, he and Kathleen grinned and, with a little Cuban action, stepped forward-forward-forward.