

DO NOT GO GENTLY

WITH MY FATHER DEAD in the other room, I could feel the moistness on my palms as the police officer asked us: “If he died at 8:25, why did you wait until midnight to report his death?”

It had all seemed perfectly logical at the time, but as the lieutenant’s eyes bore into mine – that unwavering, unnerving stare that cops must be taught at the academy – I felt like I should confess to something, anything, just to break that stare. Sure, there was something fishy going on, but it had nothing to do with my father’s death. Well, not directly.

It had all started about seven hours before. It was the night of January 8, 2009, and my father, George, was in the last stages of his battle with cancer. It had been alternately inspiring, depressing, amusing, and challenging as my two brothers and I coped with the deterioration of a once-vibrant man.

It was especially wearing on my older brother, Nick, who lived in San Francisco. After my father was diagnosed with the illness, Nick seemed to be here in New York City every other month to help George (and the rest of us) cope. Most of the time, he came with his wife, Dora, and their presence and help were invaluable. This must have been a financial hardship on them; both were self-employed and they had to take time off from work to be here. But they never complained. It was simply something that had to be done.

George, though bedridden and very gaunt, still had a twinkle in his eye and took delight in entertaining visitors. Many came calling with long faces, and my father would quickly admonish them, saying, “No sad faces here!” To one young man who seemed particularly morose, George said, “Look at this!” and held up his bony arm and let his watch slide down. “Isn’t that amazing! See how thin I’ve gotten.”

Some people cope with the imminent arrival of death by retreating from the public eye. Not George. He was an entertainer till the end. And on January 8, we could sense that the end was near. Even though Nick and Dora had gone back to California five days before – the prognosis then was that George could last weeks – he suddenly, unexpectedly got worse. Nick and Dora boarded a return flight as soon as they heard, but, alas, they arrived an hour too late. Their plane was due in at 9:30, but, at 8:25, George died.

I had heard that death could be a beautiful thing; in *Camille*, Greta Garbo just closes her eyes and she passes away without her lover even noticing. The real thing was quite horrible. I was standing in the room outside George’s bedroom, waiting to go in; I didn’t want to crowd them – Peter had been assisting the nurse for a few moments but he called me into the room. George gripped Peter and me by the arms, and as he stared wild-eyed at us, I could feel the life draining out of him – although he seemed to be fighting until the very end. Whoever said, “He did not go gently into that good night” could have been talking about George.

He was gone. But then there was one final spasm – and then he really was gone, his mouth and eyes wide open as though he were auditioning for a ghastly horror movie. The home care worker closed his eyes – which was a relief – but nothing could be done about his mouth. I didn’t want to look at him. I didn’t want to remember him this way. So unmoving, so cold, so unlike George. So dead.

We wept over his body, partly relieved by the end of the ordeal, not yet fully aware of our loss (that would only come years later as we lived a life without George.)

Now the waiting began. The wait for Nick and Dora. The wait for the coroner. The long night was just beginning.

Nick and Dora arrived at about 10:30. They wanted to perform a ritual over George's body; he was oiled down and we all joined hands around him and began a chant, with different people saying a few words over him, wishing him goodbye in their own way. It was surreal. I wondered what George would have thought of it.

By the time we had finished, it was about 11:30. We talked a little; we had to call the coroner. Matters were complicated; George had said at different times that he had wanted to leave his brain to science, so doctors could use it in their research into the causes and possible cures for Alzheimer's, the disease which had so ravaged my mother. The problem was George hadn't signed the consent form to donate his brain.

"Well," said Nick, the lawyer, "his not signing would be considered a clear indication of his intentions."

"Look," argued Peter, with passion, "I talked to George about this many times, and I know he wanted to do this."

We went back and forth on it, but to me it seemed like an academic question. George was gone now; whatever he wanted was trumped by the fact that he wasn't signing anything.

Well, that didn't prove insurmountable. After the discussion ended, Nick said, "Okay. We'll sign it."

Nick did a fair imitation of George's signature; Peter and I signed on as witnesses, dating it.

We then called the funeral home. It was about midnight now and the man on the other end said that they couldn't pick up the body until the coroner and the police signed off on it. The coroner? The police? What did they have to do with it? "Because it was a home death, you have to have a statement from your father's doctor saying it was expected," explained the man at the funeral home. "Then the police and the coroner have to sign off that the death was legitimate." In other words, that there was no foul play.

As instructed, we called "911," and explained the situation to them. Faster than you could say "Barney Miller" (or so it seemed to my sleep-addled self), there was a group of blue-suited cops in the apartment, checking out George's body, poking around in corners, asking us questions.

"What time did he die?" asked a serious-looking man who was addressed by everyone as "lieutenant."

"At about 8:25," Peter volunteered.

The lieutenant paused and looked up from his notepad. "But this 911 report says you called in the death at midnight. "If he died at 8:25, why did you wait until midnight to report his death? Why did you wait so long?"

"Ah, well that's easy to explain," I said.

The lieutenant stood silently.

"We were waiting for my brother and sister-in-law to arrive."

"When did they get here?"

"At about 10:30."

The lieutenant looked up again from his notepad. "Ten-thirty you say?"

"Yes."

"That still leaves about an hour and a half before you called 911."

How could we explain what had happened? It all seemed so simple at the time. Now we looked like we were hiding something.

"He died from cancer, you said?"

"Yes."

The lieutenant's eyes were unwavering. "Why wasn't he in the hospital?"

"He wanted to die at home," said Nick.

The cop turned and addressed Nick. "So, you flew in from San Francisco. If he was so sick, why weren't you here with him?"

"I was. They told us he was doing better, so we went back to San Francisco five days ago. I had been here for a month. I had to get back to work."

"Uh-huh."

"It's simple, officer," I said. "We were talking to the funeral home. Our dad's body has to go to NYU Medical School first; our dad donated his brain to science and they have to remove it before he goes to the funeral home. We have a form," I ended lamely.

"Form?"

"For his brain donation."

"Let me see that," he said, taking the form from my hand.

He looked at it, studying it intently. "It says the witnesses are Tom Soter and Peter Soter," he said thoughtfully. "That's you," he said, looking at me with that unblinking stare that cops must learn in basic training, "and you," he said, turning to Peter. He paused, and then said, "It's dated tonight." He looked up. "Your father signed this tonight?"

Before we could reply there was a commotion at the door. Two shortish men – one black, one white, in ankle-length trench coats, wearing snap-brim fedoras like characters out of *Guys and Dolls* – breezed into the room. The lieutenant looked up as the pair flashed badges and hustled into the bedroom where my father's body was lying. They were in there for what seemed like only minutes, and then they were out again. "That's OK then," one of them said to the lieutenant, and they slid into the night.

"Who were they?" I asked after a moment.

"Homicide," said the lieutenant. He didn't explain further, but he seemed to have lost interest in the tale of George's brain. "You have a doctor I can call to confirm this?"

We gave him the name and phone number of George's doctor. Although it was well past 2 A.M., the officer called the doctor. He explained the situation and then listened as the doctor talked. "Uh-huh," said the cop. "Uh-huh." Pause, as the doctor replied. "You don't say?" Pause. "And he said what?" Pause. "I see." Pause. "Homicide was just here." Pause. "Well, it's a home death, so we had to be sure." Pause. "Thank you, doctor."

He hung up and turned to face us. "We'll be going now. I'm leaving these two officers behind to wait for the coroner to come by and sign off on it." He paused. "I'm sorry for your loss." He turned and left abruptly.

The two cops who were left behind stood guard awkwardly by the door, ensuring that no unauthorized person could get in (who would want to?). I was exhausted; it was late (or early, depending on how you cut it). But I felt sorry for the police officers, young men who seemed fresh-faced and new to the job.

"Would you like to sit down?" I asked.

"No, thank you, sir. The lieutenant wouldn't like that."

They stood silently. I felt uncomfortable and tried to make small talk. "Those two guys in trench coats were characters, weren't they?"

"Homicide detectives," said one cop.

"Oh, really." Silence. "Do you ever watch *Homicide: Life on the Streets*? It's supposed to be the most realistic of the cop shows."

"I never watch police shows on TV," said one. "They never get it right."

"There's one show that got it," said the other. "What was it called...?" He tried to remember.

"*Hill Street Blues*? *NYPD Blue*?" I asked.

"No, no – it was, yeah, it was *Barney Miller*."

Nick spoke up, indicating my brother, Peter, who was sleeping on the couch. “He’s married to Barney Miller’s daughter.”

“Really?” said the cop, showing interest.

“Yeah, Amelia Linden. Her father is Hal Linden.”

The cops sat down. It struck me then that the whole situation had become quite bizarre, surreal even. With our father lying dead in the other room, we were talking about Peter’s father-in-law’s role as a comedic policeman with two rookie cops who were standing watch in our father’s living room. It was a situation that would have appealed to George.

The coroner eventually came, and he was followed by the funeral home folks, who finally arrived at 5:30. Although Peter had slept a bit, Nick, Dora, and I stayed up through the long night. The rest is a blur to me, but they eventually wheeled George’s body out, and I never saw him again.

Well, that’s not quite true. Some time later, Peter brought me a little ceramic jar with some of George’s cremated remains in it. “That’s George?” asked five-year-old Helena, his granddaughter. “Goodbye, George,” she said, in the accepting way children have with death and loss. “Goodbye.”

We all said our final goodbyes that summer in Greece, on a family trip that George had paid for as a going away present. It was nighttime, and Peter, Nick, Dora, Amelia, their children, and I stood on Likavitos (Mount Lycabettus), a church on a mountain overlooking Athens. Dora said a prayer of farewell to George and each of us took a handful of his ashes and cast them off the side of the mountain into the open air. And, without missing a beat, the strong winds blew the ashes right back at us – and into the faces of the dozens of tourists who were admiring the view.

George was, as always irrepensible, a prima donna to the end – and beyond.

So long, dad. You’re the tops.

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From OVERHEARD ON A BUS