I SEE YOU

ELIZABETH MAILER

IT IS DAY 42 IN THE ICU at Mount Sinai Hospital. My father is a "7" out of "10" on the malnutrition scale, with starving children in Africa being a "5." Dad is thinner now than he was sixty years ago, when discharged with jaundice from the Army. He is unable to speak, eat or swallow and he cannot breathe without a ventilator. The tracheal ventilator—a small, plastic, adaptor-like device—protrudes from the front of his neck near his Adam's apple.

A tube inserted into Dad's chest pulls yellow-gray mucus out of his lungs and siphons it into a bag that hangs over one side of the bed; a catheter is draining urine into a second bag nearby. Liquid nutrients enter his system by way of a feeding tube inserted into his nose. A hydrating IV is inserted into a vein in the crook of his arm while a second IV delivers an arsenal of antibiotics to combat the spike in his white cell count.

The doctors tell us that his lungs, kidneys and heart are failing and his body is shutting down. There is nothing more that they can do for him. His end is near.

He is a prisoner in his own body.

After we meet for a final word with the doctors, nurses move my father from the ICU to a room on the eleventh floor. With fern-green armchairs, forest green carpeting, floral-print curtains and abstract paintings on the papered walls, it looks more like a hotel suite than a hospital room. Except for the ventilator, there are no more tubes, bags, wires, IVs, beeping machines or fluorescent lights. A bit of Dad's dignity is restored. I grab hold of the guardrail alongside his bed, as though I am standing on a train that is about to pull out of the station. With his cloudy blue-gray eyes, pale sunken cheeks, thin lips and toothless grimace, he

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has the face of an old tortoise. The once-prominent, distinct bridge of Dad's very large nose is now flattened from several invasive procedures.

My father is dying and yet he is wide-awake and hyper-alert. Death is imminent yet I do not know what to say or how to be around him. At this moment, I feel driven to buoy his spirits, which is most likely the last thing he wants. Regardless, I bombard him with an overly solicitous tone:

"Dad, are you o.k.? Are you comfortable? Do you need anything? Are you in pain?" I practically shout since he is hard-of-hearing. He shakes his head.

"Dad, I'm sorry but I don't understand; is that a "no" to the comfort?"

Now he gestures with a nod of his head.

"Dad, I'm still not clear; is that a "yes" to the pain?"

This time he shakes his head with a vigorous "no." Now I am utterly confused. And he is utterly frustrated. He eyeballs me with a sideward glance, with something akin to annoyance. I reach out to take his hand. It feels like dead weight. His fingers are puffy and his hand is hot and swollen. I miss Dad's small, square, powerful hands; I miss those short fingers and strong thumbnails with their distinct, half-moon cuticles. I don't recognize these puffy hands; they have a generic quality, like the hands of Any Old Sick Man.

As I try to take hold of Dad's hand, he pushes my arm away with a forcefulness that surprises me. Cheap sentiment is easy at a time like this but Dad wants no part of it. This moment is not about my coddling him or his humoring me. There is no room for false piety. There is no time to waste. It is his time. It is my time. It is an initiation.

He is sober and quietly apprehensive; and yet I know that he views what is to come with a profound sense of adventure. He may be ready to die but I am not ready to let go. My gut is churning and my heart is heavy. I feel a void that is deeper than sadness.

He is breathing with a ventilator and cannot speak, but the gravity of this moment goes far beyond words:

He looks at me in a way that I will never forget. His eyes are searing. Like a laser, they cut through my reticence. His look is neither tender nor sentimental; it is fierce yet intimate. In his eyes, I see both the newborn and the ancient. The beginning and the end. His gaze reaches way back into the past and stretches far into the future. In his eyes, I glimpse the essence of our father-daughter journey, with all that is settled and unsettled; as though 48

years are distilled in a moment. In my father's eyes, I see the Master, when at the hour of his death, he chooses to pass on his power to the student. I don't know how or why but I know what his eyes are saying: "*I see you. I know who you really are. You know what your work is. Now do it. I do not have long. But don't pity me. I have had an amazing life. It's been one hell-luva ride. Now I am ready to move on.*"