

# A Warm Tub and Ice Cream

Category: Palliative and Hospice Care

written by Linda Koebner | September 25, 2024

I cradle my ninety-nine-year-old mother's head in one hand while I massage shampoo through her sparse hair. She floats in the water; her feet do not touch the end of the tub. Always a small woman, now she is barely there. I offer spoons of coffee ice cream. Of all the pleasures she still manages to eke out of her vastly diminished life, eating ice cream in a warm tub ranks high. Should one of the cats sit on the rim of the tub . . . . Well, that is perfection.

Thanks to the support of an extraordinary palliative care team, I can hold this comforting memory. It could have been different.

She was nearing the conclusion of ten decades of life. A life that started in Germany. She escaped the Holocaust to restart her life in Mexico, only to uproot again and settle in New York City. Into her eighties she remained healthy in body and mind. She climbed (in sandals!) a pyramid in Mexico, took her grandson ice skating and lived independently. She had no desire to die.

Then, a broken hip. Then, another.

During those days of morphine, in hospital and rehab she screamed that fire was engulfing her and the Nazis had come for her. To escape, she vaulted over bed guard rails, re-breaking her hip. She was in a constant state of terror, and turned against her family, who had morphed into monsters. Overworked aides left her naked and diapered.

After hospital and rehab she came home once, twice, three times. Two days before Christmas she had unmanageable stomach pain. Her physician was not available, and we could not stomach the stress of an emergency room. I called Visiting Nurse Service.

A nurse arrived with the care and wisdom we needed. She recommended home hospice.

For two years, the hospice physician, nurse, social worker and aides assured my mother's comfort and supported the family's emotional well being. Their guidance was the greatest gift. We were a team. The goal: Ruth would stay home.

At home the inner demons did not scream. Instead, she often believed she was in a beautiful hotel visiting with her dead brother. Her grandson married in her living room, and she wore her favorite dress. She had purpose: feeding the cats. And, pleasure: the warm tub and ice cream.

In the final month, we were twice told to expect "imminent death." Braced for the inevitable, I would enter her apartment not to find a corpse, but my mother eating breakfast and greeting me with "How are you, *mein hertz?*"

I cannot be certain that hospice extended my mother's life, but I am certain it allowed her a good death. She lived until the evening she lay in her own bed, cats nestled beside her, holding familiar hands.

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