

Window of Truth

Category: Awaiting a Diagnosis
written by Jill Muhrer | August 13, 2025

My stepfather, Roddy, was known for being a hypochondriac. My mother used to say, "If he sneezes, it's a medical emergency. But he'll outlive us all."

This time was different, however. He'd stopped eating, was silent, had no complaints. His oldest daughter convinced him to go to the emergency room. At first, he seemed relieved he'd see his doctor, who, he was sure, would tell him nothing was wrong. Roddy laughed, discussed politics, and reminisced.

Due to some "worrisome but inconclusive" lab results, he was admitted. In the hospital, a wild goose chase began, sidetracked by red herrings. While we studied the trail, disease ravaged his body.

Finally came a chilling phone call, a CT scan demonstrating extensive metastasis and a poor prognosis, treatments he wouldn't tolerate. "Come quickly," was the word. "He doesn't have much time."

Due to Roddy's complicated feelings about death, the family adamantly agreed, "Do NOT tell him. He can't handle knowing."

I arrived first. His room was oddly quiet and peaceful. He was confused but recognized me. He asked me to help him figure out his hospital bed. How was it constructed? What were its features? He was fixated. A newspaper lay untouched on his nightstand.

Relieved by the distraction, I figured out his bed's details with him. It was fun to share a project. He was analytical and a scholar; I was an intuitive thinker. Together, we found solutions.

Fatigued, he paused. Then he looked at me with tears in his eyes. He reached for my hand. "I know I'm dying," he said. "I can feel it."

I squeezed his hand gently and told him that I loved him. By then I was crying. He gave me a hug before he dozed off.

When I heard the others coming, I gathered up my things. As I headed down the hall, I overheard them reminding each other to keep his diagnosis secret. I turned back and told them about my conversation with Roddy—about the fact that he already knew. They didn't believe me. How could he really know? No one had told him. And didn't Roddy always think he was dying?

He died shortly after my visit. While he never knew the details of his illness, he clearly understood what was happening and wanted to share that knowledge with someone. To this day, I'm grateful that my stepfather and I shared a small window of truth that gave us both closure before his death.

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