

The Comfort of Strangers

Category: The Waiting Room

written by Ellen Rand | May 2, 2016

Mind your own business, I say to myself. It's like being in a crowded subway car: avoid eye contact, and give these people their space. Try and focus on that sappy family drama that's playing on the TV.

I'm sitting in a small, narrow waiting room reserved for families of people in intensive care, while my husband and my brother are in search of news about whether my mother is in recovery after her lung cancer surgery. I'm sitting next to a woman who is talking with a couple sitting opposite her on a settee. She is clearly upset, angry at herself for being angry at her husband earlier. She'd made him soup and a sandwich for lunch and he didn't eat much, went upstairs because he said he wasn't feeling well. And had a massive heart attack. Now he's in intensive care, and they're keeping him on life support long enough so certain family members can get to the hospital to say goodbye.

It's hard not to eavesdrop, of course. Harder still not to feel her pain, maybe because I'm still raw from my father's death, four weeks earlier, followed by my mother's unexpected diagnosis. I feel a need to say something, but what?

There's a brief lull in their conversation. So, without thinking, I touch her arm and tell her how sorry I am about her husband. About how I just lost my father, and I know how hard this is. "And I want to tell you, your husband is OK now, he really is, and it's OK to let him go." As soon as my words tumble out, I worry that she'll be offended by this unwelcome intrusion. But instead, we lock eyes momentarily, fellow travelers in the land of loss.

As my husband and my brother approach the room, I stand up, and so does the woman, who thanks me tearfully and hugs me tightly.

"Who was that?" my brother asks, as we head down the hall to see my mother.

"I don't know," I reply. Someone I connected with, maybe comforted, however briefly.

Years later I became a hospice volunteer, and now I often think about that waiting room. How could I have said those words? And the answer that still makes the most sense is, how could I not have?

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