

The Birthday Call

Category: The Phone Call

written by Cynthia Stock | November 5, 2017

"I need you to come back to the hospital," I would say over the phone. I would hear a rush of inhaled air, signaling stunned shock. "Is there someone who can drive you?" I would provide only enough details to communicate urgency and allude to the dire nature of the patient's condition.

After forty years of critical care nursing, I have lost count of how many calls like that I've made, of how I perfected the words, of how I danced around the truth, of how I baited and buffered to make sure the person on the other end of the line arrived at the hospital safely. The calls ran together. But one call stood out, because it required no words, and I was its recipient.

In April of 1977, my dad was diagnosed with a high-grade glioma. With neuro not being my nursing specialty, I looked up the term, learned the prognosis, and faced the reality of the limited time Dad had left on Earth. I flew home to see him. The tumor had already invaded Broca's area, impairing his speech. He woke up just once during my several visits, recognized me, and managed a clear "It's great," before he escaped back into an opioid coma.

On July 14, 1977, Mom called to wish me happy birthday and update me about Dad. We chatted, the call a dismal mix of celebration and mourning. A few hours later, the phone rang again. Before cell phones or caller ID, instinct prevailed. I think I knew before I answered.

"It's me," Mom said.

"He died, didn't he?" I was unforgivably calm.

We cried together, long distance.

Despite my loss, I didn't regret that Dad died on my birthday. I believed it was his last message to me, because he couldn't call.

*Cynthia Stock
Garland, Texas*