

Dose of Truth

Category: Pretending

written by Barbara Felton | October 8, 2018

“Neurodegenerative,” the neurologist repeated slowly, studying Nancy’s face as she spoke. Dr. Wang had placed her small figure on a chair near Nancy’s and leaned toward her as she explained the nature of the undifferentiated dementia that she’d produced as a diagnosis.

Relief poured through me at the triumphal sound of the spoken truth. I soaked in the honesty like dry ground receiving rain after a drought. Left to ourselves, my sister Nancy and I treated the word *dementia* like a live electric wire. Sometimes I spoke the word in a brief staccato and then pulled back to silence. Nancy had once giggled at its sound.

Pretending she was capable of doing whatever she needed to had been Nancy’s *modus vivendi* throughout her adulthood. She had maintained control of her domain – living alone, never marrying, teaching piano lessons from her home – and had succeeded in earning respect from her students and their parents, from the church congregation whose organist she was, from neighbors and friends despite what many people considered debilitating oddities. Nancy was rigid, lacked judgment about worldly matters, and had irrational fears about things like the fumes she believed emanated from driveway asphalt. Carrying on, pretending to be capable, had gotten her through life so far, and a diagnosis of early-onset dementia at age 67 wasn’t going to alter her approach to her life.

I had pretended, along with her, thinking that supporting her self-confidence was constructive. But now, with the dementia diagnosis, pretending seemed wrong, dangerous. I craved Dr. Wang’s honesty.

In the silence of the examination room, I split my glances between Nancy and Dr. Wang. Nancy’s face was blank. Dr. Wang looked as if she were about to cry.

“Neurodegenerative,” Dr. Wang repeated and then added, “It’s really hard, yes?”

“Yes,” said Nancy. She pulled herself out of her haze to speak, finding her posture as she looked toward Dr. Wang. “But I get comfort from knowing other people have the same problem. My friends Margaret and June both say they lose things and have trouble remembering names.”

The truth had drained away, coursing over Nancy like water flowing over a rock. I resisted the impulse to put my head in my hands and sob.

“I need to see you again in three months,” said Dr. Wang, gently.

We’d be there, yes, yes we would be there, for another dose of truth.

Barbara Felton
Warwick, New York