

GOODBYE SYLVIA

By Ted Siegler

“Nancy, Lucinda, and I love you. Your grandchildren love you. You’ve done more than most to make the world a better place. You’ve done everything you were here to do. You can let go now.”

One last rattle and you lie still, looking ready for your next breath. But it won’t come.

I’ve brushed the bangs from your perspiring brow. Your face, gently showing seventy-seven years of living, is beautiful. The cracks in your parched lips are just a blemish.

Dad adored you. If there’s a heaven, he’s waiting for you there. Your father would have turned 113 today. He’ll be waiting, too. You made and kept life-long friends, people who sustained you, and whom you’ve sustained. They’ll mourn your loss.

It was just a month ago that Suzy and I were spending a few days in New York. We met you at a gate in Grand Central Station. As we waited, we could see you walking along the platform wearing a red cape, standing out against the gray suits of the commuter crowd. With your long strides, you cut a memorable figure. We had a wonderful time with friends at lunch and then the Philharmonic. Later, we all returned to Connecticut.

You had some minor difficulties speaking. I teased you, my mother the scholar, about being noun-impaired. We didn’t know these were early signs of aphasia. That was the last time Suzy saw you. Tonight, her plane is too late.

Nancy and Lucinda will be sorry their lives took them back to their homes. Distance is one of the drawbacks of being scattered across the country.

Thirteen days ago, was Suzy’s birthday. You and she had a strong bond built by the three decades she’s been your daughter-in-law. The bond was strengthened when she helped you care for Dad during his last month. And stronger still during her stay after the tumor was removed from your breast. We knew something was wrong when she didn’t hear from you. Instead, we got a call from your brother. You were in the hospital.

It seemed impossible. Just two days earlier you’d thrown a dinner party. You were planning to listen to your Denver grandson’s concert over the internet. You had plans for tennis the following morning. You had too much to do to be hospitalized.

I flew east the next day. By the time I walked into your room, aphasia had blocked almost all of your speech. We didn’t know at the time that metastatic cancer was aggressively attacking your brain.

Nancy and Lucinda came for a long weekend, and we did our best to confront the unknown. We built a decision tree based on possible test results. It was the best we could do. At the end of the tree, following paths from answers we didn’t want to hear, was hospice – here you are. When

you reached the last positive path, I had to order a feeding tube. I knew you didn't want one, but you had to have enough strength to get to Yale-New Haven Hospital. You were completely non-verbal, but the anger in your eyes said it all. The best I can say is that the instant I was told you weren't a candidate it was removed immediately. I'd probably do the same thing again, but I will regret forever having to make the decision.

There were more people than I could count wanting news of you, praying for you, thinking of you, and supporting you from near and afar. I sent them email updates each day and received back messages to share with you. You had visitors. Guthrie, the minister who led your church for so many years, came from New Hampshire to pray with you. His wife, Sue, added a special kind of intellectual joy to the visit. I could see how much that meant to you. When your many dear friends were here, the hospital room was a warmer and happier place.

I've managed the necessary administrative details, dealing with lawyers and bank accounts. There was no avoiding it. But mostly, I've been sitting with you. We've talked about more than fifty years of life together. There weren't enough days – you went so quickly. Given what you must have been enduring, that was merciful. But I'm not ready. How could I be?

“I love you Mom. I have to go tell the nurse you're gone.”