

Amazing Grace in the Valley of the Plain People

by Stephanie La Rose

When I arrived, Mom's garage door was up, which was not unusual. She'd perch on the threshold, *Christian Science Sentinel* in lap, and hail neighbors. In the kitchen, a pan of soup crawled with ants. As I advanced from the kitchen's mess to the living room's stench, I troubled over how long the house had gaped open for passersby. I tiptoed the hall toward the bedroom. I heard a rasping breath in, then nothing, nothing, and finally a cough out.

I took two steps back. I bowed my head and considered fleeing. I'd dreaded this day since Mom had returned from spending eight months in the Christian Science nursing home twenty years ago. The bewilderment, the impotency, I didn't want it. I'd rather have found her dead.

"Cora?" She called. She'd heard me and mistaken me for her neighbor.

Towels, clothing, blankets, diapers strewn in fetid bundles. Phone dead in the living room.

"What do you expect to happen here?" I asked.

"Water," she rasped. "Cold."

I cupped her neck and lifted her head. She gulped then emitted a "Gah" of relief or pain. Her eyes flickered. I released her head. She dragged breath through clenched teeth.

The room fuzzed. I waved my arm behind me to catch the chair. "I don't suppose you'd go to the hospital."

Mom glared. If she could rise, she would snap me in two.

I spread my fingers across my mouth and averted my eyes. "How long have you been unable to sit up? Unable to breathe?"

She would not answer.

I squeezed my head between my knees. "What, is, your, plan?"

"I *plan* to have my healing," she spat.

My body rattled when I called my sister Kim to report Mom's state, to describe the refrigerator's rot.

"Should I fly to Michigan?" Kim asked.

"Yes," I responded, uncharacteristically firm.

Mom had written Kim and me out of her will to bequeath all to the Church of Christ, Scientist after she survived the Christian Science nursing home. Amongst our filial failures: opposing her abjuration of medical care when suddenly paralyzed at age fifty-three; refusing to transport her to the Christian Science nursing home in Ohio for "radical reliance on God"; and declining to pay off the nursing home's fifty-thousand-dollar fee.

Mom intended to return to that nursing home should she again need to "await her healing."

When Kim arrived from D.C., she and I completed the forms for admission, though our past experience with the nursing home had taught us that Mom would die alone, lying in her own filth, abandoned to pain.

After I was frank about Mom's condition, the home refused her. They claimed lack of space, but I knew from the difference between how they spoke to me at my initial inquiry and the coldness with which they rejected us that it was for fear of remuneration, liability, or both.

Kim proposed we tend her ourselves. With no equipment or training. "I can do it," Kim said. "I did it with Nana."

Nana was Mom's own Christian Science mother, also suddenly enfeebled and dead within two months in the same nursing home.

"What do you mean?" Christian Science's shroud of secrecy meant Kim and I had never divulged what we'd witnessed and withstood.

"Mom went home at night, and I took care of Nana. I had to lift her, clean her, everything."

"Alone? All night?"

Kim nodded.

"That's child abuse. You were fifteen."

~

It had taken twenty years away from Mom and the Christian Science Church to embody the girl I should have been. She lodged in my stomach. The adult version of me ached to curl around her, to shield her with my body. Instead, I stuffed both hands down my throat and yanked her through.

She watched from the corner as I curled up and nearly died without her.

She crept toward me.

"I love you," I said.

She took my hand.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you," I told my child self.

She sat in my lap, and I stroked her hair. "I'm sorry no one protected you."

Now that the girl who should have been was fed and grown, now that she and I were one, I could not receive my mother. I could not forgive the abuse and neglect. She remained dangerous. Virulent. Mercurial. I froze.

How to clean the filth from the folds of her skin? Kim undid the diaper. I grabbed Mom's feet and frogged them.

She howled in outrage.

Kim used a fistful of wipes.

We heaved Mom by the hip onto her side.

Kim whisked away the pad, replaced it, and set up the new diaper. We rolled Mom onto her back. Kim secured the flaps.

Mom had fallen unconscious.

"We can't do this. What, we call 9-1-1 to collect the corpse? We'll be arrested."

Kim shifted her eyes from me to Mom to me. She thrust the diarrhea-sogged diaper at me. I took it to a garbage can where it festered atop putrid towels and bedding.

A month before I found Mom incapacitated, Kim had joined me in Florida for vacation. In advance, I'd emailed her what I'd been writing, which was flashes of growing up in the Church. Kim responded with a deluge of did-that-really-happens.

When her plane landed, I whisked her to my favorite restaurant. Patrons clinked wineglasses and spilled onto the street. Kim wept at the table. I'd peeled back our joint, curated veneer. Outside, waiting for a car, Kim and I said "I love you" to each other for the first time in our lives.

On chaise loungers in the backyard, we unwrapped memories, ceding shards for the other to cradle. We beheld their shape. We hefted their weight.

"I'll get us some lunch." I slammed out Mom's front door into blasting sunlight and a swarm of wasps.

At *Panera Bread*, I set up my laptop. The first in-home health care agency I found said, "that sounds like an emergency." The second: "We cannot send a worker to a house with a critically ill patient and no diagnosis." The third, when I explained Mom's lifelong adherence to Christian Science and eschewal of medical care, suggested I call the County Consortium on Aging.

I reached a woman at the Consortium whose father-in-law had been a Christian Scientist. He died never having seen a doctor. She understood.

She described the network of hospice agencies that blanketed the state. Two doctors had to certify the patient terminal in less than six months were the illness to follow its expected course without life-prolonging treatment. At that point, the patient could remain home or be situated in adult foster care with the hospice agency ministering comfort care.

My next task was finding a nursing home close enough to visit daily without surrendering my job as a law professor. The first had a waiting list, the second a poor reputation.

Via a single review from a hospice agency, there, bobbing in a sea of corn, stood Plain Valley, a Mennonite Senior Community. It did not advertise. It had no website. It had a single hospice suite that allowed non-Mennonite congregants. The suite was available.

"Do you think we're going the right way?" I was driving Kim to tour Plain Valley, eleven miles from my home in a college town nestled in rural Michigan.

“It doesn’t seem like we could be going *anywhere*.” Kim took in the neat white farmhouses that appeared when we passed a driveway. Otherwise, all we could see was corn. Until, in a clearing, a tiny bell-topped school and a stacked-stone building with a white portico materialized. As we registered in the vestibule, Plain Valley’s director Shane joined and introduced himself.

We pushed through a second set of glass doors into the vaulted great room where a fountain burbled. We passed eight ladies in bonnets stitching a quilt stretched between rollers. We strolled a hallway that had the appearance of a village lane. Sunshine poured through light tubes. Outdoor sconces flanked the doors. Alongside were copper cut-outs of deer, pine trees, and the residents’ names. Beneath the windows, boxes cascaded with plants. I rubbed a waxy leaf. They were real. There were trees in jardinieres and wood-plank benches. The doors were open. There were no televisions. Each resident, sewing or reading, faced us as we passed. Goose-fleshed, I noticed my tank top. I tugged at my cut-offs. All week, Kim and I had been hot and harried. I’d not considered what to wear.

“This is the hospice suite,” Shane announced at the hall’s end. “It runs entirely by donation.”

“Why?” I whispered. They could have filled the suite no matter the cost.

“No one should be excluded,” Shane answered.

Kim and I realized later that the solitary non-congregant suite was maintained as a service to those without community. The Mennonites for whom the facility was built remained near the farms where they had always lived, among swaths of family.

Plain Valley would not admit Mom without her first seeing a doctor to assess her condition. That required a trip to the hospital. We explained the need for visiting the emergency room, then extolled the virtues of Plain Valley. “Plain Valley is beautiful. It’s perfect for you. They will help us take care of you without medicine.”

Mom shocked us by nodding. I slapped my power of attorney onto her chest and punched 9-1-1 into my phone.

The paramedics arrived in their big rig and their big boots. They crowded Mom’s bed.

“Connie, do you know who the President of the United States is?” one of them asked.

Mom waved her hands as she cogitated then batted away the question. Kim and I had become accustomed to her agitation and worried about her cognition. Before I found her, we knew she was addled. She got lost enroute to a favorite restaurant. Despite her condition, she kept driving, even all the way from Michigan to Nashville for a Christian Science gathering, resulting in, we discovered later, a car crash she withheld from us. She had swayed on her feet at my son’s college graduation, and all I could feel was rancor. “I’m perfectly fine,” she’d bark if we asked how she was feeling.

A paramedic counted her pulse and pressed a stethoscope to her chest. Out the window, I glimpsed two other medics spraying Mom’s front steps to rid them of the wasps.

“Can you tell me what year it is?”

Mom huffed and ticked her eyes to the left.

“How about your date of birth?”

She rattled it off.

“Sounds like you’re having trouble breathing. How about some oxygen?”

When Mom assented, and the paramedic secured the mask, Kim and I widened our eyes.

“She is a very sick woman,” the emergency room doctor protested. Kim and I nodded.

“She has a serious heart condition.”

“She’s tachycardic, but it’s not just that.” He talked in terms we could not retain.

“She has an out-of-control bladder infection.” That explained the brown diapers even without diarrhea.

“She is severely anemic. Her hemoglobin is critically low. If she does not receive a blood transfusion, I wouldn’t be surprised if she died within one to two days.”

“Okay.” Kim clutched her stomach. “Enough.” Her eyes welled. “She’s not getting a blood transfusion. She’s been a Christian Scientist her whole life. She’s terrified of doctors. She’ll think we’re torturing her. We’re shocked she agreed to come here. If she won’t have the blood transfusion, that’s enough for hospice, right?”

“I’m not finished.”

We shook our heads.

He blinked, shifted his weight, and studied his chart.

We wouldn’t learn until she died months later and we read the death certificate that Mom had a big stomach tumor pressing on her spine because we’d cut that doctor off. The cancer wasn’t altogether a surprise. She’d lost seventy pounds in the past year. Her mobility was never good because she had polio as a child, then paralysis from Guillan-Barre syndrome in her early fifties but could now barely shuffle her feet. She refused a walker or cane because Christian Science forbids the use of medical devices. If a follower of Christian Science uses one or goes to a doctor, even against their will, the church shuns them. Mom’s Christian Science practitioner, someone paid to pray for or with a congregant for healing, had talked to Mom numerous times a day. Once we summoned the ambulance, her practitioner never spoke to her again.

“I’ll get the caseworker,” the ER doctor said. The magic word. The caseworker would contact hospice and arrange Mom’s transfer to Plain Valley.

Unable to complete the paperwork in time to move to Plain Valley while the hospice nurse was there to admit her, Mom spent the night in the hospital’s palliative care unit. Kim and I worried she would die there.

The hours ticked by. Mom’s lifelong fear of hospitals seemed to manifest in the patient assigned to the next room, an inmate from the county jail undergoing hospice care. He spent part of the next day braced in his doorframe, feet in the room, head and chest looming while uniformed officers flanked him. The dying prisoner curled his lip to reveal his canines as Kim and I scurried to the terrace to escape the unit’s reek.

In the late afternoon, the caseworker approached us and said, “You’re not getting a rig today.” She handed me the forms. “You could drive her.”

“How would I get her in my car?”

“We’ll help you.”

“She cries out in pain when even slightly jostled.”

“We’ll give her morphine.”

“She won’t take that.”

“We don’t need her permission. Just yours.”

“Yes,” I said.

An hour later, we swung into Plain Valley. Shane the director and Teresa the nurse hustled the blacktop towing a gurney. Shane unlatched the passenger door as I switched off the engine. “Hello, Connie,” he said. “We’re getting you out of there.”

Teresa hooked her elbows under Mom’s wings. “Put your arms around my neck,” she said and hauled Mom into an embrace. “You’re here,” Teresa breathed, as though receiving a beloved.

My bitter stomach unclenched. Teresa and Shane maneuvered Mom onto the gurney and guided her to the patio entrance of her new room.

“This is your patio, Mom.” I gestured. “It’s all yours.”

“Isn’t it pretty?” Kim asked.

Mom could not respond. Her jaw hung crooked. The staff wheeled her through the French doors into the hospice suite.

“Which way would you like her bed?” Teresa asked.

“Facing the window,” Kim and I chorused. Across the courtyard, sanguine geraniums overflowed their planters on the patios of the Mennonites in independent living.

Mom’s room had a kitchen and a sitting area with a Stickley coffee table and two La-Z-Boys. Another overstuffed red recliner flanked the bed. A barn door opened onto a tiled bathroom with a wheel-in shower. Adjacent was a room for family with a larger kitchen, another set of recliners, and a couch that unfolded into a queen-sized bed. Six chairs ringed a dining table. The tan carpet was new. The stench of human waste from Mom’s house and the hospital’s palliative care unit dissolved.

Kim and I were so tired, we could scant sit. When the nurses went to examine Mom, I stood. “We did it,” I said. “I can’t believe we did it.”

“We did it,” Kim sighed.

We hugged as though we were that sort of family.

The hospice nurse, having assessed Mom, said, “I would not categorize her as in the active stage of dying.” He described signs that would reveal death was imminent, like discoloration of the hands and feet and, hours before the end, the dreaded death rattle.

When the nurse left, Kim and I drifted to Mom's room. "Isn't it beautiful?" we asked. She could not answer. She was scarcely conscious and hadn't eaten in six days. How much more actively could she die?

The oxygen she unfathomably consented to swooshed and whirled as she succumbed to stony sleep. I smoothed her hair. I hadn't voluntarily touched her in twenty years. "We love you, Mom," I said.

Kim looked horrified.

In the parking lot, she paced. "Why did you say that?" She demanded. "I don't know how to say that. Do I love her?"

"I guess we do," I said, "or we wouldn't be doing all of this."

Our cars bolted through a tunnel of corn high as our hoods, gravel pinging off the undercarriage.

On Mom's second day at Plain Valley, Kim and I were in the café with the twenty-five residents. "We still have three spots left for the field trip to the Native American exhibit," Shane announced before dinner, the noon meal in this farming community. The women wore ankle-length, cap-sleeved dresses in faded flower patterns, thick knee socks, and sneakers, their hair bobby-pinned into buns covered by black saucer-sized caps. They were stout and sturdy, with piercing blue eyes and no make-up. The men, all bearded, dressed in light short-sleeved button-downs, dark slacks, and gum-soled shoes. No one wore jewelry, not even wedding rings.

The Café had four booths, four round tables, and an open kitchen with stainless steel surfaces. Pots and pans hung from the ceiling. The Café opened to the lobby, where the ladies poked tiny stitches into a quilt. Sunlight streamed from the courtyard.

"I thought it was an agricultural exhibit," mumbled Oak to no one.

"*Slash* agricultural exhibit," Shane recovered.

Kim and I trailed behind the residents to the salad bar, then proceeded to the counter. Nancy the cook stiffened before she laid a slice of meatloaf on my plate, spooned on mashed potatoes, and motioned toward the gravy. Kim and I sat on the same side of the booth, facing the residents.

"Grandpa, would you say the prayer?" Nancy invited.

One-hundred-year-old Ardis blessed the food and the hands that made it.

The assemblage nibbled salad in silence until a resident two tables over declared, "I'm going."

Kim and I chortled.

"I might," joined another.

Kim bit into a peach and widened her eyes. They were bursting fresh and sweet, slippery and cold. "We have to take some of these to Mom," she said.

"I will go," pronounced Ardis.

"Did you get this Jell-O?" Kim asked.

"I don't like Jell-O," I said.

"Big mistake."

I launched my fork over to scoop up green gelatin, fruit, and cottage cheese. "Oh, that's delicious," I said.

"I'm not going." Oak resolved.

Oak's wife Bonnetta scowled. "Why not? You should go."

Ardis's group rose and wheeled their walkers to Nancy's serving area. The other residents followed, one table at a time, like a wedding reception.

"Oh, no." Kim pointed a fork.

"Oh, *no*," I repeated.

"Would you go if I were going?" asked Bonnetta.

Everyone chewed, eyes on their plates.

"Yes," Oak said. He chomped a thick slice of bread slathered in butter.

"Home-made," I cried, holding mine aloft.

"I'd have to get gas in the car," complained Oak.

"You're not *driving*," scolded Bonnetta. "It's a group outing. That's the point. You go with your friends."

Shane and Nancy rolled a cart.

"Raspberry pie?" Nancy asked.

"Yes, please," Kim said.

"Would you like ice cream on it?" Shane wielded a scooper.

"Why not," I said.

We bit into the pie. The raspberries were freshly picked, the crust flaky and crisp. “We *have* to get a piece of this for Mom,” Kim said.

Over the coming days, Kim and I began to adapt to the rhythms of the community. While wheeling Mom around, we discovered peaches on every flat surface, laid out on newspapers beneath fans. Plain Valley oozed of dripping-ripe peach-flesh. The next day, the residents prepared eighteen bushels for freezing.

The following afternoon, they were in the Café, peeling and cutting beets from the Litwiller farm for Nancy to put up in pickling liquid.

“Can we do anything to help?” I asked.

No one responded. Six ladies in hand-sewn dresses worked their paring knives. Two peeled while four chopped. Kim and I stared at the back of their black-capped heads until we wandered away, pushing Mom ahead, to inspect the progress on the red wedding quilt. We parked Mom and helped Bonnetta finish a puzzle of Mackinac Island.

“Where are your people?” they eventually asked as they became accustomed to our presence.

“Where are her people?”

“Where is her church family?” they asked.

We explained that they abandoned her when they realized she was going to die.

“That’s so sad.” Their eyes brimmed.

“It would be sadder,” we said, “if she hadn’t done the same to others before her.”

Kim rocked on Mom’s patio outside the French doors. Mom sat in her wheelchair, a fluffy blanket from home on her lap.

Kim said, “Mom, do you think you’re going to see Nana?”

“Oh, yes.”

“And your sister Arline?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you think you’ll see them? In heaven?” Unlike me, allergic to religion since escaping Christian Science, Kim had converted to Catholicism when she married.

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know you believed that,” Kim said. Christian Science teaches that material life, the physical body, all that we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch is an illusion. When you overcome the illusion, you ascend to be absorbed back into Divine Mind. You have no body for a funeral, no self for heaven.

“I’m glad,” Kim said. She didn’t hide her tears.

Mom contemplated the hydrangeas across the way and the potted geraniums the little bearded man in independent living deadheaded every morning.

“Do you think God will tell you when it’s time to go?”

“Oh, yes. He will.” This was utterly at odds with Christian Science, so Kim was amazed when Mom agreed.

“Mom, you know Stef and I tried to do what you wanted. We think this is a good place.”

“Oh, yes, it is. Thank you.” Kim exhaled and absorbed the thanks we never imagined we would receive.

The sun cascaded over mother and daughter, the sky so blue it hurt.

“I don’t know what it’s like now, but when I visited you at the Christian Science nursing home, it wasn’t good.”

Ohio regulations do not apply to facilities that “rely upon faith-based healing.” The staff has no medical training or equipment. They do not intervene when a resident chokes or screams or when his foot falls off from gangrene.

“Oh, yes, this is much better.”

It was late August in Michigan. Fall bit the afternoon air. Mom drooped in her chair, chin gone loose.

“You’re looking tired. Let’s get you inside.” Kim rolled Mom in and pressed the button on her wristband for the staff. The nurse placed one then the other tumescent foot on the carpet. Kim and the nurse hauled Mom by the underarms. Mom swayed, diaper dangling. They backed her to the bed and let her down.

Mom slumped, mouth hanging. Kim pivoted her legs while the nurse turned the torso. Mom was too close to the front, like always. The nurse wheeled the bed away from the wall and got on its other side. On the count of three, Kim and the nurse used Mom’s

waterproof pad to heave her to the center. Mom panted. The nurse turned on the oxygen and fit the cannula. Mom's eyes rolled back.

In mid-September, when we steered Mom through the courtyard after dinner, six of the residents sat under the pergola in Adirondack chairs, peeling the papery covering off the ground cherries from the container garden. They'd peeled a whole banker's box.

"Wow. Are those all from the patch here?" Kim asked.

"Yes," Bonetta answered. No one looked at us.

"It doesn't seem like there could be so many," Kim said.

"We've been collecting for weeks."

There was an extra pie pan by the box. I picked it up and filled it with unpeeled ground cherries and handed one to Mom. She rolled off the husk with her claw.

The berries inside were hard and yellow. We had bit into one yesterday after asking Ardis what they were. They grew on thick stalks like squash with broad, rounded leaves. The berry was extremely sour and teemed with seeds. "They'll take over the garden if you let them," Ardis warned.

After we peeled a minute, Bonetta said, "Many hands make light work."

Who was this docile woman?

"Would you like to try the raspberry pie?" Mom had started eating again at Plain Valley.

"Nancy picked the berries from her garden this morning."

"Sure," Mom said. I raised the head of her bed and fed her a bite.

"Yum!" She opened for more. I placed the flaked crust and raspberry sweet on her tongue. "I'm a little birdy!" She chirped.

When I'd found her at home, she'd looked preyed upon, flesh pendant.

At Plain Valley, I watched her strip to her essence. I expected debility to sharpen her rage, but I guess she was no longer able to police her mind to conform to the strictures of Christian Science, which dictated that there was no such thing as disease and condemned the sensation of pain as failure. Maybe the dissonance between reality and Christian Science had been the source of the rage all along.

She luxuriated in having her hair raked back, her hand stroked. Her eyes softened when she caught sight of us. She liked to be tucked in and read to. We strolled her around. We showed her off. We handed her petals, pinecones, fallen leaves, and ground cherries. She spun them between her fingers to discover their texture.

Mom's hair reverted to the silky white blonde of toddlerhood. Her skin-tone evened. Her jowls retracted and smoothed across her bones.

She became the girl she should have been.

My mind, a fiddlehead, unfurled. Mom's own Christian Science upbringing had halted the self's development. Mom's girl had never been fed and grown.

When Teresa came to change Mom, Kim and I fled to the family side of the suite and closed the door. We heard Mom mewling. She could not help it.

"Connie, are you in pain?" Teresa asked when Mom was clean.

"No," she whimpered. Tears streamed her hair.

"She will always say no to that. Her programming is too strong," I said. "I'd like you to say, 'Connie, it seems like you're in a lot of pain. I'm going to put something in your mouth to help with that.' If she opens her mouth, that's consent."

The staff consulted Shane, who agreed.

Mom opened her mouth.

With the morphine, she melted.

Kim and I meandered the courtyard. The residents played bouncy ball as physical therapy. Ardis tossed the ball to me.

Kim went home to D.C. for a week. I read Mom essays from Ann Patchett's *These Precious Days*.

She never asked to hear the weekly Lesson. While growing up, she made us read The Lesson aloud every day. Even as an adult, if I drove her someplace, she'd produce The Books from her purse. When I pled, "Mom, please stop," she read louder.

We left The Books on her bedside table. She never touched them. Was she done with Christian Science, or was Christian Science done with her?

The first essay was about Ann Patchett's three dads. At its end, when I read, "And I, who was always looking to slip away, wanted to stay," my voice failed. "I'll be back," I said and slipped away.

When I returned, she pointed a finger and croaked, "All-right?"

What do you care? I wanted to shout. What was I supposed to do with this new information, this new mother, so late in the game? She couldn't remember how to suck through a straw. She'd bite, and no liquid could rise. She was so wasted, I could see through her ears.

Yet, she was so heavy to lift. The earth was pulling her back into itself.

That night, I called Kim. "Come back now."

Kim and I pulled our recliners to Mom's bed and tucked our toes under our new ankle-length skirts.

While Kim read, I held Mom's hand. She held back. Kim and I laughed, then cried, then laughed again. We read about Kate DiCamillo. We read about the stupid things people said to Patchett about not having children.

The world fell away.

At the end of the day, it was just us. Connie and the girls.

Fall held out all the way to October. Little rain, no dull skies. Clarion blue. The land transformed. Tractors chewed thousands of acres of corn stalks. Sileage tattered the edge of dirt roads, flew out of truck-beds, and coated our cars. Only stubble remained in the fields. We could see for miles. The Mennonites repopulated their patios with pumpkins, with pots of rust and golden mums. We curled up in our La-Z-Boys and snoozed on and off.

"What are you two girls giggling about?" Mom teased when Kim and I shared stories.

On the morning of Mom's birthday, she became unresponsive. Her jaw opened and set to the left. Her face tipped toward the wall and hardened.

The hospice nurse said she was not in the active stage of dying. When he left, Teresa, the Plain Valley nurse, peeled off Mom's socks and showed us her feet, bulging purple.

The next morning, the hospice nurse, who'd sent a photograph of Mom's feet to the doctor, announced that the doctor had prescribed something to increase Mom's blood pressure and an antibiotic.

"That's not life-extending treatment?" I asked.

"It's to make her comfortable," he said.

"We don't want her in pain," Kim said.

Confused, after the noon meal, we sought out Teresa. Though kind, the hospice staff seemed brusque compared to the Mennonites, who, before Plain Valley, we'd envisioned as stony and insular. Instead, they enfolded us.

"Do you think she's dying?" We asked Teresa.

"I think it's on the scale of hours not days."

"Would it be bad to say no to the doctor's prescription of antibiotics and blood pressure medication?"

"No. I'm not sure why he would prescribe those in hospice."

"Okay. No medication. Only the morphine," I said.

Mom remained frozen all afternoon, but, when I said, "We love you, Mom," I thought I detected a bodily exhale.

When Teresa pushed Mom onto her left hip to change her, Mom's limbs retained their position, like the raccoon dead on the roadside. Was it excruciating to be moved, as it had been before she'd gone moribund?

Two hours later, we heard the death rattle. Kim and I stilled in our recliners.

"I think we should remove the oxygen," I said.

Kim turned from Mom and stared into my eyes.

We located Teresa.

"We'd like you to turn off the oxygen," I said.

"Okay."

"Do you think that's the wrong thing to do?"

“No. You can always change your mind if she’s struggling.”

“But she’s going to struggle, right? She’s going to struggle before she dies.”

Teresa nodded.

“Turn off the oxygen.”

When Teresa switched off the machine and detached the cannula, I thought I saw a slight panicked reaction, a wildness to Mom’s eye. Teresa coiled the tubing in the nightstand drawer and left the suite, pulling the door behind her.

The room was silent after seven weeks, and none of us could breathe.

It was dark outside. Quiet.

Kim sat in the chair by Mom’s head. I curled up in the red recliner. Kim started reading. That first essay on the three dads.

We chuckled.

We cried.

Kim stopped.

“I think she’s gone,” Kim said.

“*What?*”

“I think she’s gone.”

Silence.

“Look, her neck.”

With Mom’s head turned toward the wall, there’d been a strong pulse visible in her neck. Kim reached out and touched the neck. She retracted her hand. I got up from my chair. Touched. Retracted. Sat down.

We breathed in. We breathed out. We stared at Mom’s neck.

“Oh my God,” I said.

We got out of the chairs and embraced. “We should wait to call anyone,” Kim said. “Once we call, we’ll never be alone again.”

We sat back down and held hands.

“It was so peaceful,” I said.

Mom’s face drained of color. Suddenly, it looked as though made of stone.

“I’ll get Teresa,” I said.

Teresa was still at Plain Valley, though she was supposed to leave at five. Nancy should have gone home once supper was put up. They would not leave us.

"Mom's gone," we told Teresa at the nurses' station.

Teresa and Nancy came to the suite.

Nancy hugged us with her strong arms.

Teresa kissed Mom's forehead and said, "I love you, Connie."

I wanted to slow time. But time had thickened the moment we arrived six weeks ago. The Mennonites of Plain Valley, a mirage undulating in a rustle of corn, had stitched our riven hearts.

"I'd like to wash her," Teresa said and left to prepare.

"Should we let her?" asked Kim.

"Teresa knows death," I said.

I called the funeral home. Kim un-made the pull-out bed where we'd intended to spend the night, taking turns sleeping and watching Mom. Nancy tidied and sang in a crystalline voice.

When we reentered her room, Mom was in her mint zip-up dressing gown. Her hair was clean and damp and pushed back from her face. She was covered in a quilt we'd never seen. The quilt had large, rust-colored butterflies at Mom's feet that ascended to smaller, orange butterflies, then yellow, fading in color, smaller in size, until, at Mom's neck, they turned pure white and scattered like dandelion fluff.

When the undertaker arrived, Teresa and Nancy helped move Mom's body to the gurney.

"If you don't mind," Nancy said, "We will sing."

*Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil a life of joy and peace.*

I could feel the collective breath, the chests' rise and fall, in the silent moment before Kim said, "Thank you."

~

Kim and I kept a hand on the black bag and eyes on Mom as the undertaker wheeled her through the halls of Plain Valley. He'd left the bag open around Mom's head. When we reached his van, we turned away while he zipped and loaded the body.

"I'm scared I'll never see this again." Kim gestured around her.

We snuck pictures of the courtyard, the pergola, the quilt, the Café, the fountain, the puzzles. The Mennonites did not like photographs, particularly of people. The residents were tucked away for the night. We skirted the staff.

We packed Kim's suitcase, then Mom's pictures of her grandkids, her dressing gowns and blanket.

In the parking lot, Kim gazed at the entrance. She turned and imbibed the field to the tree line. She tipped her head to the sky.

She brushed my arm.

"I love you," she said.

I said it back.

"I'll see you at the house."

She drove off down the gravel road.

I rubbed dust from the butternut squash in the container garden. I picked up Ardis's milk jug and watered the mums. Finally, I started the car. A humpback moon illuminated our passage.



Stephanie La Rose is a professor at Michigan State University College of Law, where she trains soon-to-be lawyers in the art of written and oral advocacy, and is a former prosecutor of child abuse and neglect cases. She earned her MFA at Vermont College of Fine Arts and is finishing a memoir of ecclesiastical trauma. Her work has appeared in *The Normal School*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and *Past Ten*.