

We think we have time

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The trouble is, you think you have time.
(Jack Kornfeld, *Buddha's Little Instruction Book*,
New York: Bantam Books, 1994)

Roberta is in the hospital, dying. Her body has been distilled to skin and skeleton and wisps of tissue; she has metastatic ovarian cancer. Thomas, her husband, sits on a bedside cot; it is where he lives and sleeps. A small table holds his pills, water glass, newspaper, *Reader's Digest* and two photographs. One is a grainy, dog-eared snapshot of his wife on their wedding day 50 years ago; the other, their dead son on his twenty-fifth birthday. He lifts the photographs from the table and traces the outlines of their faces with a trembling finger.

Roberta groans and exhales a ragged breath. Thomas swivels and squints his eyes. "Roberta? Are you okay? Sweetie?" The bed sheet rises and eases his face. "She's still with us," he murmurs. Thomas knows her breathing is tenuous; every rattled breath could be the last. He stands and shuffles to her bedside and tells her he loves her and it is okay to let go, even though his heart is not ready. It will never be ready; he is letting her go because he loves her.

He pivots toward me. "Doctor, did you ever realize that the word 'alone' contains the word 'one'? And when you lose a spouse, you go from two to one?" His shoulders slump and his eyes tear. "I don't know how I'm gonna live without

her." He bends to kiss her brow and laments that she seems wedged between here and there. "Doctor, how is she still living? It has been twelve days."

"She's doing this on her time, not ours," I reply, "but I think it will be soon."

Thomas plops on to the cot; he is worn and wearied. He has remained by Roberta's side since her admission, lurching on her meals and bathing in her shower. I suggest he get some dinner in the hospital cafeteria; it will afford him a brief respite from the strain of his vigil. I assure him that I will remain with her until he returns, and if things change, I will get him immediately. He nods, whispers in her ear, "I will be right back, don't you go anywhere," and slips from the room.

Within minutes, her breathing becomes erratic and shallow. A soft snore escapes her lips, then, silence. I press my stethoscope to her chest; her breath and heart are quiet.

I scramble to the cafeteria and motion for Thomas. He hobbles to my side and drops his food tray on the floor.

"She died, didn't she? She died when I was gone." His voice is loud and scatters in the din of the cafeteria. I lead him to a small conference room.

"Oh dear God," he howls. He collapses to the floor and weeps. "You said I could get some dinner. Why did you say that?" I apologize and tell him I did not think she would die when he was away. "Damn you," he bellows, "damn you."

I lean in to offer solace, but he pushes me away. "Why did you tell me I could leave? Why? Why?" He repeats the refrain over and over. I remain silent and offer the only thing I have: my presence. Finally, he struggles to his feet and we return to her room.

"Please leave, now," he demands. I apologize again, and advise him that I will request that a medical resident pronounce Roberta so I do not anger him further. He flicks his fingers in dismissal. Guilt and shame overwhelm me.

The following day, I send Thomas a condolence letter and offer to speak with him at his convenience. I had hoped to restore our relationship, offer an apology, and support his grieving process. He never responded.

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This article has been peer reviewed.

These events occurred in 1983. Names and identifying details have also been altered.

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