

Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo (BPPV) is an inner ear problem that results in short lasting, but severe, room-spinning vertigo...often expressed as "dizziness".

Although called benign, those who suffer from this are distressed. <http://www-surgery.ucsd.edu>

LETTING GO

They sipped the last drop of Cline chardonnay, and quietly brought the glasses to the sink to rinse off and leave there. It was soothing to Mary to repeat this small act every night. Mike never said anything while they turned off the lights. There was no need to. The silence was reassuring between them.

Mary crawled under the covers, reaching for a paperback on the nightstand when the phone rang. It was her little sis, Joanne.

“Hello, Mary. Sorry to call so late.”

Mary gulped.

“It’s awful, awful news.” Mary heard her crying. “Mother suffered a stroke. I’m at University of Washington Hospital in Seattle. They’re still doing tests to see about brain damage.”

“Omigod! How did it happen?” Mary swallowed hard. She sat straight up in bed. Balance off, she teetered, wobbling and swaying, grabbing at the sheets to steady herself. Mike noticed.

“Mother was in the HarbourPoint marathon this morning.. All the little old ladies dress up like the Seahawks. Mother placed third and was so proud of herself. So, the girls and I took her to our favorite Middle Eastern restaurant, Tabbouli, afterwards. We stuffed ourselves with too much moussaka and dolmades.” Joanne gasped for air, breathless. Mary heard her panting over the handset.

“What time was that?” Mary’s voice sounded mechanical, even to her own ears.

“Oh, about seven. We were all having such a good time! Leslie had just made a beautiful beaded peacock belt and was showing off, dancing and gyrating in front of us. We left around nine o’clock. First, we dropped off my girls, Megan and Sarah, at their friend’s home for a sleepover.”

--Mother was feeling fine, but around ten o’clock she complained she wasn’t feeling so hot.” Mary could hear Joanne’s voice crack.

-- But, you know how Mother’s always complaining. Thought the music and alcohol may have given her a bitch of a headache. *Debilezza*, you know--that’s what grandma used to call it. It’s the only Italian I remember: ‘Debilitation’. ‘Dizziness’. Didn’t think it was serious”

--So, I was getting the futon made up for her in my living room, to spend the night, when I heard a crash. I ran into the kitchen ... and there’s Mother—lying on the floor, still conscious. Confused. She had trouble speaking. The right side of her face looked like an awful Halloween mask. Droopy, lips all twisted—like a Münch.”

“I called 911. . But, I was shaking so hard I could hardly push the buttons on the phone. Didn’t want to wait for an ambulance. Wanted to get Mother to a hospital as fast as I could but I was too afraid to drive.”

Poor Joanne! “You did the right thing. The paramedics can administer emergency treatment while they’re in transit.”

“Oh”, Joanne’s voice broke off. There was a pause. “When can you come out here? I can’t handle this all by myself.”

“I’ll check to see when the next available flight is.”

“Thank god. The girls are fine. At their friend’s house until tomorrow. They don’t know yet. I’ll tell them in the morning. No sense in their losing sleep too.”

-- We’ll have to take shifts at the hospital... until Mother pulls through.”

“Okay, hang in there. I’ll call you on your cell and let you know my flight info as soon as I know.” Mary thought to herself: Mother is not going to pull through.

“Make sure you text-message me because I can’t pick up calls inside the hospital.”

“Okay. I’ll be there as soon as I possibly can.”

“Can’t wait to see you. This is just so horrible. I just can’t handle this by myself,” she repeated, voice dropping.

“Talk to you when I have flight info. Bye. For now. ”

“Bye.” The sisters clicked on each other.

Mary was fortunate to find an Alaska Air flight out from San Jose at 11:30 a.m. the next day. Could be at the hospital by 2:30, she thought. She knew Mother was not going to make it. Would she hang in there until Mother’s Day?

The airline employee at the ticket counter had had a bad day. She was about Mary’s height, which meant she had to look up to see the top of the computer screen

when Mary checked in. The line was very long and the Alaska Air employee did not make eye contact.

Mary's heart went out to the woman. What a shit job to have—with disgruntled customers ready to vent at any time. Swiping her ticket in the “self-service” kiosk, she lugged the duffel onto the scale, knowing it was close to the maximum weight. Most of the suitcase was stuffed with old photo albums to pass the time with her sister, her nieces, and even perhaps, her mother if she were coherent enough. Their mother never liked looking at photos of herself—never had, even when she was young.

The employee grunted as she looked at the total weight. One pound more and Mary would have been charged fifteen dollars.

“You're lucky this time”, she grunted at Mary, chinning toward the read-out on the scale.

“What gate is my flight?” Mary asked in a voice not quite hers, more hesitating, even a bit timid.

“It's on your boarding pass. Next,” she called out, looking past Mary. She had been dismissed.

She looks like my mom in some of the old photos I'm bringing, Mary shuddered.

Running to gate A39, tucked away in the corner, Mary was breathless and sweaty. The Alaska Air employee attending the gate announced: “We are still waiting for one flight attendant to report for this flight. We appreciate your patience in an anticipated delay of about one hour.” Great! Now I'll probably get stuck in rush-hour traffic, trying to get to the hospital, Mary fretted. This employee was more pleasant-looking, silver hair

youthfully barretted on each side of her temples, and smiling gently at people sitting around the gate.

Now I probably won't get to the hospital until five at the earliest, she muttered to herself. This trip is going to be awful. I can just feel it, her mood souring at the impending ordeal. Standing near Starbucks, Mary slipped her cell phone out of her purse. Only two bars showed in the LCD. She voice-activated Joanne's number.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, you're fine. Noise in the background though."

"Well, the plane's been delayed. Estimated time of arrival is now around 3:45. So, I'll call you when I land." She felt uncomfortable, looking around uneasily. Everyone was looking elsewhere. That's good. She hated announcing her business in public spaces.

"Good. Mother's improved but still in very bad condition."

"Be there as soon as I can. Let's hope she hangs on until I get there."

"You don't think this is it for Mom, do you?" Joanne's voice squeaked.

"No, of course not," Mary lied. "Just want to get there before she falls asleep for the night, that's all."

* * * * *

The plane took off around 1:30 p.m. The seats were getting narrower and narrower and more and more uncomfortable. She could no longer eat the food that was served. She noticed fewer passengers were eating the food either. Her stomach always felt queasy, but she had, at least up until now, avoided having to pull out one of those

dreaded vomit bags from the seat pocket. She could see other planes converging on SeaTac airport at ominously close range. The pilot announced they would have to taxi over the Seattle runway for another thirty-five minutes, meaning touch-down would not be at 3:30 as scheduled. Alaska Airline flight #325 finally descended at four. Mary's ears were so clogged, pain radiating down the sides of her neck, collarbone and arms, that she felt vertiginous. She took out a gigantic Pippin apple Mike had given her, unclasping her seatbelt. This will help, she prayed, as she gnawed into the juicy apple, releasing ear pressure. By the time she walked down the ladder, both the apple and the clogged ears were gone.

She felt unsteady. Vertigo perhaps. It runs in the family—on the Italian side, the matrilinear line. Only the females have Grandma's "debilezza". She gripped the railing tightly as she concentrated on each step, walking slowly and carefully. She was glad she had no carry-on luggage, just her purse.

"Joanne, I just arrived!" Mary announced too loudly on her cell phone as she watched for her duffel to disgorge from the carousel. She always had problems hearing after she had been flying. Her head was surprisingly clear all of a sudden, avoiding the inner-ear turbulence that sometimes made her fall.

-- Will be at the hospital, barring gridlock, around five," Mary sighed.

“Don’t worry. Mother’s awake. I don’t know how. There’s fluid in her lungs. Her breathing’s irregular. But, we still have some time.” Joanne sounded preternaturally calm.

The taxi took Mary directly to the hospital. As the cab approached the circular entry to the cardiovascular wing, Mary saw Joanne was waiting near the front desk.

It was almost 5:30. Mary rushed through the semi-automatic doors. Hugging Joanne, her eyes all glassy, lids tear-swollen, Mary could feel her tremble as she hung on to her back. Joanne seemed filled with water, inconsequential.

“Are you alright, little sis?”

Joanne shook her head. “Megan and Sarah are such a comfort. What an unbelievable ordeal--to face this at their age! They’ve been with her all day. Stroking her hair. Kissing her.”

Mary hugged her sister again, this time more tightly.

“Does she know who’s in the room?”

“Well, she can talk. She says she’s not afraid to die.”

“Does she look all shriveled up and scary?” Mary asked. Joanne looked up, perhaps surprised her big sister was afraid.

“No. Don’t worry. You’ll both be okay.” Now she patted her Mary’s hand and held it as they walked towards the elevator. Mary blushed as Joanne pressed the button to the third floor. The two sisters said nothing on the elevator as they rode up. Mary hated elevators almost as much as hospitals.

The hospital room was grey and dimly lit, but the machinery was shiny stainless steel. Her mother's face looked blank—as if cold cream had removed not only her makeup but her personality. Overnight Mother had aged at least ten years. Mary shuddered. Merely looking at her mother was painful, even alarming. She had had very little experience being around very old people, let alone the dying. She didn't like to think about death and dying. It depressed her. Here sat her mother, shrunken into an unbelievably small homunculus, spine twisted. The turquoise hospital clothes seemed draped over a cadaver.

“Hello, Mother. How are you?” Mary bent over her mother's bones to give her a kiss on her cheek, which felt like fine tissue paper. The silence between them was ancient and primal.

Their mother smelled awful. Decay had already begun. Joanne walked over and patted their mother's hand. Mary robotically copied her, holding her mother's stone-cold hand, like fine Italian marble. Stone-cold like their grandpa's hands in his open casket, Mary remembered. Grandpa had died over forty years ago.

“It takes... a lot of.. to talk,” she rasped, hissing a tiny puff of putrid air laced with phlegm.

Her two daughters looked at each other in silence.

Sarah and Megan flanked their grandmother's bed. But Mother managed to smile angelically at them, holding their hands. Perhaps Joanne and her two daughters were Mother's last chance to re-connect, to redeem herself. Maybe they could provide some semblance of solace.

Turning to her nieces, Mary asked them: “Why don’t you get something to eat and I’ll stay here? You’ve been with your grandma all day.”

“Are you sure, Auntie Mary? We aren’t very hungry. And we don’t want to leave her,” Megan said, her large doe-eyes turned downward.

“You should eat something”, Joanne suggested. “Mary’s right. We can text you, if there’s a dramatic change for the worse. Keep your phones on, just in case.” The two girls were red-eyed. Even Sarah’s eyeshadow seemed to have lost its glitter.

“Maybe you can find a drink Grandma would like,” Mary lied, knowing their grandmother probably would never eat or drink again.

“I guess that’s alright,” Megan shrugged, not convinced. Mary hugged them both and they left to wait downstairs in the lobby for their dad.

The attending nurse walked by their room. Seeing them, awkwardly waiting, she paused and came in.

“Hello. How are you doing, Mrs. Whitman?” the heavy-set nurse asked. She walked over and looked at the machine readings.

“It won’t be long now,” she smiled gently. “I take it you’re family.”

Mary cleared her throat. “Yes, we’re her daughters.”

“Well, I’ve been the attending nurse since your mother’s admission to cardiac. I’ll tell you...she has a very strong will, in spite of her weak vital signs.”

“That sounds just like Mom”, Joanne sighed, her voice rough.

The nurse patted Joanne’s hand, very softly, almost shyly.

“I have to go finish my rounds, but if you have any questions, I’d be happy to answer them now.”

“We’re fine for now, I guess,” Mary responded. “But we’ll look for you in the hallway, if we think of something.”

“Alright then. I’ll check back—just to make sure you’re okay.” Smiling kindly, the nurse left.

Their mother was mumbling, talking in her sleep. Mary noticed her mother’s green-veined purple feet.

“She seems to be saying something, but I can’t make it out,” Mary whispered to Joanne, knocking the alarm out of her own voice.

“Maybe she’s talking to her angels. Mom likes doing that, you know.”

“Angels?! There’s just decay and recycling. One great big compost heap. Unless we turn into primal stardust.”

“I don’t believe in an afterlife either. Maybe because of all those years of Catholic school,” Joanne grimaced.

--I wonder if Mother believes.”

Mary laughed, this time a genuine laugh. Not forced.

“Yeah. I don’t know anyone, in the end, who’s comforted by thoughts of God.”

“Mother probably believes she’d go to heaven regardless. So I guess it would be comforting to her,” Mary laughed at her sister.

“Who knows.” Joanne shrugged. “She’s mumbling,” she said, bending over their mother’s mouth.

“What?”

“She’s saying what a hateful man Daddy was!”

“No! You’re kidding, right?”

“Listen for yourself.”

So, Mary leaned in, putting her left ear closer to her mother’s mouth. It was hard to get close to her; it always had been. She was picking at the hospital sheets--agitated, jerky—as if having a small seizure. Her pressure was dropping. Her pulse was decreasing rapidly.

“Can you hear me?” Mary whispered into her ear.

“Your father’s such a selfish man,” she now gasped into her older daughter’s ear. She didn’t realize her husband had died two years before. Her long-buried resentment surfaced like a bagged-corpse on the Ganges river... like a decomposing fish.

Mary felt disconnected, like looking at some exotic animal in a zoo. All she needed was to take out a notepad and write field notes.

Mrs. Whitman’s eyes closed. She was still talking in her sleep. It was difficult to believe she was not fully conscious. She had been flushed, tinged an apricot hue, when her daughters and granddaughters had first arrived. Now her skin was a purplish-blue, like some octopus, Joanne’s favorite sea animal, in the nether depths of the sub-marine world.

Her mother’s hands were almost unbearably cold. She had always been self-conscious about her hands, thinking that the curves of her fingernails were too rounded, like claws. If she could see them now! The nailbeds were aquamarine. Her hands were folded in on themselves like some bi-valve clam. She breathed in short little pants, stopped and started again.

Mary wanted her to leave this world gently. Not in a rage. So she tried to wake her, a bit repulsed at the thought of touching impending death. She heard rattling, deep

in her mother's lungs and upper throat, down deep in her guts. It was awkward. Too confining and claustrophobic now. Mary felt the need for more oxygen.

“Mother? You're talking in your sleep. Why don't I ask the nurse for something to help you sleep?” Mary cooed, as if she were talking to one of her children when they were babies. She stiffly bent down to kiss her mother. The air seemed to puff out, a blowing of the lips with every exhalation. Horrible— her breath smelled like something rotting, like shit evacuated from her mouth.

Mary walked to the other side of their mother's bed, and pulled up a chair. Mary wanted to pat her mother's hand too, but something stopped her. She had always been afraid of those hands.

Mrs. Whitman doubled over coughing, but nothing came up.

“Would you like something to drink, Mother?” Joanne asked as she tried to fluff the pillow beneath her head.

“No!” She panted. “Everything... tastes... like shit. I want... to die.” And with that, Mrs. Whitman's mouth collapsed; her jaw mutated, seemingly startled to have been subjected to so much pain. Mary could see a huge boil filled with pus on her lower lip, where the oxygen tube had pressed against it.

“Shall we call hospice?” Joanne offered, to no one in particular, her voice cracking.

Mrs. Whitman's eyes were still open, like her Alexander doll, the most life-like in her doll collection, but then they fluttered shut like a moth too close to the light. She couldn't or wouldn't let go.

"I'll call the nurse", Mary said, running out the door to get someone,--and to escape.

Spotting the attending nurse at the on-call station chatting with one of the doctors, Mary waited a few moments, until the nurse noticed her. The doctor, glancing at Mary, took his clipboard and left.

"I think our mother has died. Can you please come quickly and look at her?"

The nurse, in a very kind supportive gesture, reached out to touch Mary's hand. Mary didn't like to be touched by strangers, but this time she allowed her to. The nurse's hand soothed her.

"What room is she in?" the nurse asked quietly, as if talking to a fragile or ill child, looking down at her clipboard.

"Let's see. Room 583," she answered herself before Mary could. "So, it's been almost twelve hours since her stroke," the nurse replied, checking off her own questions. It must have been a very long shift, Mary thought. She must be exhausted.

"You go back to the room and I'll be there shortly." She pointed in the direction of Room 583.

As if jerked back to a waking state, Mary walked to 583. Joanne, bent over, held on to their mother's purplish tentacle-like hands.

Mary had read someplace that talking to the dying was a comfort to their departing soul because hearing is the last sense to go. Maybe from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, she couldn't remember.

“Mother, I hope you can hear me.”

Somewhere deep in her mother's throat, gurgling bubbled up.

“I guess this is my last chance to forgive you. I need to let go. For your sake,...and for mine.” Mary felt nauseous.

The nurse came in and went directly to the machine to look at Mrs. Whitman's vital signs.

“Are you ready now?” she whispered softly.

Mrs. Whitman's eyes were closed. She exhaled once very loudly and harshly, a fish out of water. Two long shudders followed. She was gone.

Mary's shoulders felt heavy. Numb. Frozen. Her face would not go through the motions. Her grief would have to be a subtle one,—like a marinade on some meat.

It hit her then—the danger of her thoughts. A part of her had been waiting for years for her mother to die. Now she would have the canker of memory: the memory of her mother. She died on Mother's Day.