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A Birth and a Death, or Everything Important Happens on Monday

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A Birth and a Death, or Everything Important Happens on Monday

—DARYL CUMBER DANCE

I was going to be a grandmother. It had taken all too long. I gave birth to my first child, Warren Dance Jr., when I was only twenty-one, but Warren Jr. was going to be almost thirty-six when his first child was born. As excited as I was, I decided to wait until a week after the July 4, 1995, appearance of my new grand to visit him in Houston, Texas. Other members of the family were going to be there for the birth, and I wanted time to enjoy this baby *all by myself*, so I planned to arrive after everyone else had left. I convinced myself and announced to my children that my tardiness was dictated by a concern about Taddy having someone there to help her with Yosie after the other visitors had left.

For seven glorious days, I enjoyed this beautiful baby boy, sharing him only with his mother and his father. I held him, rocked him, fed him occasionally (he usually nursed), changed him, sang to him, just looked at him and floated off in dreams of this new life. I called for the family progenitor, Abraham Brown, and all the other ancestors to witness and look over this newest branch on our family tree. I felt younger, renewed, and more optimistic about life than I had in eons. I sang, I danced; when I glimpsed my face in a passing mirror, I caught myself smiling rather than frowning, as was more often the case in recent years. I vowed to improve the quality of

my own life—eat better, exercise more, focus on positive thoughts. Life was beautiful, and I had a lot more living to do.

On the evening of the seventh day of my arrival, my daughter, Daryl Lynn, called from my mother's home in Charles City, Virginia. Joyfully I grabbed the phone to share with her the excitement of my day—Yosie's smile, the way he followed me with his eyes, the tight clasp of his little hand on my finger. She didn't seem very eager to hear my gleeful accounts, and I paused, sensing that my mood was about to end.

Change swoops in without ceremony, warning, or explanation, suddenly and abruptly altering everything in a moment. Death was competing with life for my attention. My mother required immediate surgery for colon cancer, the dreaded disease that had claimed the lives of my grandmother and aunt. Surgery was scheduled for Monday, the day on which Mother always declared everything important in her life happened: "I was born on Monday, I got married on Monday, you [meaning me] were born on Monday, Allen [my father] died on Monday, my first grandson [Warren Jr.] was born on Monday . . . I know I will die on Monday."

Not only had all the joie de vivre that I had recently experienced vanished, but hope never showed her face. Already I knew it was time not only to add a new line to my genealogy chart from Abraham, but also to prepare to fill in the closing dates to another entry in the generation before my own.

Though Mother's surgery proceeded well, the doctor informed me that because of the spread of the cancer, she would live only a month or two.

Should she be told?

I talked to my children. We agreed that we could not conceal this knowledge from her—she had always taken charge and charted the course of her own life; she would certainly insist upon controlling, or at least dictating, her final days. I arranged for the doctor to meet with Mother, Daryl Lynn, and me to discuss the prognosis, though we agreed not to speculate on any precise time.

Mother was neither visibly surprised nor overwhelmed. After inquiring about possible treatments and learning that they would be futile, she began planning for what time she had, calmly observing, "Mama lived exactly three months after *her* surgery."

That was longer than her doctor gave Mother, but I didn't tell her that.

She, of course, wanted to see her new great-grandson, and his parents quickly arranged to bring him for frequent visits. Each visit was a booster for her. She held him, cuddled him, posed with him, played the piano for him, found joy in the new life that she experienced through him.

She surprised everyone, lingering to enjoy all the familiar rituals of another full year with us, including (through pictures) her great-grandson's first birthday. Considering the ominous prognosis, it was something of a surprise to have her with us to celebrate Thanksgiving and then Christmas and then Easter, going to church as she had every Easter of my life. We knew it would be her farewell to Elam Baptist Church (founded in 1810 by her great-great-great-grandfather Abraham), but it was appropriate that she would have us deck her out in her beautiful Easter outfit on the day of the resurrection. I pinned a lavender orchid on her lapel, and she basked in the attention lavished on her by her church family, who crowded around to express their delight to see her out. This grand appearance took its toll; her only trips after this would be to the hospital, where we observed Mother's Day *and* one trip to see the water.

When Daryl Lynn and I had left the hospital to take her home after surgery, she had declared that she wanted to see the water, but then when I offered to drive her to the shores of the James River, she decided instead to go directly home. She had left over a month before, clearly recognizing the possibility that she might never return, and she was eager to see if her lilac trees were still blooming, to sleep in her bedroom decorated by her in shades of purple, to eat at her table, even to piddle around in her own kitchen—and to get her business affairs in order. So a trip to the river was forgotten until the leaves of one last fall had turned all orange and golden, the snows of one last winter had melted, and the buds of one last spring had blossomed. Nearly ten months after she returned home following her surgery, on one bright June day, I remembered her expressed desire to see the water and suggested we drive down to the James River. She eagerly assented. With much difficulty, Daryl Lynn and I got her into the car, and we drove off for the James. I turned onto the wrong road, but Mother took charge and directed me to the proper one. I drove up to the water and parked. She smiled as she gazed out over the James, sat there, contentedly perusing the deep, calm, inscrutable source of life, and finally announced that she was ready to go home. As I prepared to turn into the driveway to her house, she pointed in the opposite direction and

announced, "Next time we'll go that way." She never left her house again. Sure enough, her next journey was "that way"—when we left the church and passed her house, heading to the old church burial grounds. How quickly a year passes! How brief is the journey from the waters of life to the dust of eternity!

But I'm getting ahead of my story. Within a few days of that trip to the James River, Mother glanced up at me from her bed and said, "I'm ready."

"Ready?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"Ready. R-e-a-d-y," she impatiently spelled it out to me.

"What are you talking about, Mother?" I insisted.

"I'm so tired," she declared.

"Tired? What are you tired of, Mother?"

"I'm tired of this pain."

"Well, let me get some of your medication for you," I readily offered.

"I'm tired of the medicine. I'm tired of this bed. I'm tired of everything," she exhaled as she turned her head away, as if she had said everything she ever had to say to me in this lifetime.

I called her grands.

They came to say their good-byes, first the younger grandson, Allen, from Maryland, and then the older grandson, Warren Jr., and the just-turned-one-year-old great-grandbaby from Texas. I feared they would not make it on time, and I kept telling Mother that Yosie was on the way. Her tired body painfully continued to breathe laboriously, awaiting Yosie's arrival.

Yosie sat on his father's lap by her bed and reached out to her hand—that hand that was already so cold and clammy that I avoided holding it, choosing instead to pat and massage it through the sheet. He sat quietly and patiently, looking at her as if seeking some explanation. She lay peacefully, eyes focused on something we could not see. The old folks would have said that she was looking at the angels. One child of Abraham was going to join that long line that had gone on before and another child of Abraham was watching over this journey and giving her permission to go. I . . . I was a medium, interpreting a ritual to which neither of the main participants could give expression.

Yosie left to return to Houston on Sunday night. Mother died on Monday. Both of the lavender lilac trees in her front yard burst forth in their most radiant blooms ever to bid her adieu.