

Tell My Mother

By Hamish Roberts

“Mum,” Sarah said, “Mum.” The old woman’s lids had dropped quite suddenly, leaving two small ellipses of white. Sarah pushed a button.

“Is she okay?” she asked as doors slid open and let in the nurse. He glanced at charts drifting across a screen above her mother’s bed.

“She’s fine.” He cupped the back of her head and gently removed her top pillow. She mumbled something about skiing. “There we go,” he said, withdrawing his hand and pulling off the thin latex glove that preserved him from her oily skull. He discarded them down a chute.

“We were just talking a second ago. She was right with me.”

“That’ll happen. The painkillers cross a certain threshold and...”— he snapped his fingers— “...So...she’ll be coming and going.”

Sarah nodded. Then, “Wait,” she called. The nurse stopped and hovered halfway out the door. She hesitated. She had a question but the answer...well, there was no good answer. “Do you—how long has she got? I know it’s soon. But...days? Is it weeks? It can’t be hours, can it? I’m supposed to be meeting a client today who’s in quite a bad way, but I don’t want to leave, if...I don’t want to miss it.”

I do, she thought. No I don’t. Yes, I do.

“I...” The nurse shuffled back in. “Her levels are...but I’m not...I am going to go and talk to her doctor for you.” A smile started to light up his face, but he shook it away like a fly. “Has her doctor not been in?”

“Not since I’ve been here.”

“I’ll go and find him,” he said, swallowing back another smile. It was a particularly kind, undemanding smile, Sarah thought, that probably endeared him to most of the patients on this

floor and which he was now having to remove as it appeared automatically. These kinds of conversations didn't normally fall to him; he wasn't trained for them. Neither was Sarah.

And he left. The doors slid closed.

Sarah was always glad when her mother lost consciousness. It allowed her to study the old woman's face. "Stop looking at me like that," her mother would say when awake, "Stop examining me." Now, Sarah had that face all to herself. It had thickened and hardened over the last ten years; and now, in these last few weeks, drugs had bent her further out of recognition. Her dimples were lost beneath an all-round bloatedness that moved the corners of her mouth and eyes out of position. Sarah found some kind of...not joy, exactly, but some kind of satiation that she indulged guiltily, like it was perverse, in trying to reassemble the mother she knew from that blown up face. Step by step. The wrinkles put back, then reduced as the skin is firmed. The head deflated, the chin lifted and flattened. Colour revived in the eyes, the skin, the hair. And there she was. Beautiful and lucid.

This was a pre-emptive coping mechanism. A reminder that Sarah had already lost her mother, and not only once. Not only the lucid, talkative elderly woman of a few years before, met for lunch almost every Sunday, her frame creaking but functional, her brain healthy and free of black spots. Not only her. Sarah had also lost the towering benevolence who'd coddled her. She'd lost the never-thanked ground beneath her feet, who picked her up from school and parties, who carefully allowed her to make and learn from her own mistakes. And she'd lost the human being, both wiser and more fragile than she'd realised, who moved in whilst her daughter's divorce dragged itself out. Sarah had lost all these mothers, just as her mother had lost a little girl who didn't have a care in the world.

This in turn allowed Sarah to see better how little she had left to lose. Most shades of her mother's personality had hardened into a dead, putrid wood that encased what was left. Only a few tools could break through: music from her youth was the most effective, but it was the

book that lay open in her daughter's lap that she actively demanded. A fantasy, aimed at children. She had read them to Sarah as a child and, although she confessed when Sarah was older that she'd only appreciated their properties as a bedtime tranquiliser, she now demanded her daughter read them back to her, every single day. Afterwards, she became more lucid and familiar, and it was when her confusion returned and tangled up their conversation that she requested the storytelling resumed, as if some part of her sought out its remedying effect on her cognition.

So, there was a little to say goodbye to. But not much.

A sharp inhalation whistled between the old woman's teeth. Her eyes shot open and swung with alarm toward the sink on wheels, which Sarah promptly pushed to her side. With shaking fingers on the bowl's rim, out she spat a globule of black, bloody bile. She remained there with her neck craned over the bowl a while, immobilised by her exertion, whilst Sarah ran the hot tap and dabbed her lips with a cloth.

"Where's your father?" she croaked, once she'd regained the strength to gingerly shift back to her pillow.

Sarah had long since learnt not to provide replacements for her mother's missing memories. They only drained down the same hidden fissures as the originals. "He's away on business." Mother nodded, looking embarrassed, as if she'd let her senility slip into the open.

"Go on then," she said, nodding at the book lying open in Sarah's lap. Sarah picked it up and searched for her place.

Before she found it, the doors slid open and in walked the nurse. He stopped beside Mother. "Mrs Durnham. How are you feeling?"

She glanced at him uneasily. "Who is this?"

"Your nurse. He's looking after you."

"I'm Thomas. We met this morning. How are you feeling, Mrs Durnham?"

“What?”

“How about I bring you up a bit, so we can talk properly?” He waited for permission, his finger braced above a button on her bedside.

“What?” He went ahead and pushed the button, and she eyed him coldly, all the while she ascended.

“There you go. Easier to talk now, isn’t it?”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Where’s my doctor?”

“That’s right, I’m a nurse, not your doctor. I’ve just spoken to him, and he’ll be in this afternoon to see you.”

The nurse caught Sarah’s eye and gave a file in his hand a little shake.

“Right,” said Sarah, “How is she doing?”

“Shall we step outside?”

“No. She’ll wonder why and not let it go. Just say, in so many words.”

The nurse looked very uneasy. Mother’s gaze narrowed and shot between the two of them.

“Say what, in so many words?”

“How you are doing,” Sarah answered. Then, to the nurse, “Just say, so we can both understand what we need to.”

“Right,” said the nurse. He was meeting and then running away from the old woman’s suspicious gaze, and so his confusion took on the rhythm of hers, their respective gazes seesawing absurdly around the room. “Well. Mrs Durnham, you suffered a major heart attack last week.”

“Did I?”

“Yes. But don’t worry, you... your vitals are stable for now. It’s unlikely you’ll be leaving *here* for several days and possibly not for a bit longer. It’s hard to say.” The nurse then repeated the word *here* with even more emphasis and a finger circling the room. Before he could stop himself, he winked at Sarah and then walked straight out of the room.

“Right,” said Sarah as the doors shut themselves behind him, “Good. Now...” She placed a finger back on the open page, “...Where were we?”

“I want to be hooked up and dilated.”

“No.”

“I do. I know what’s happening. I will put it in writing.” Mother looked about her. “Where’s a pen?”

She’d made this request two days before and the week before that, too. She made it every time she began to remember what she was doing there (dying). She wanted her functioning sensory organs hooked up to a virtual reality. She’d be left to dry up on a life support machine whilst she wrung out every remaining drop of brain activity on the latest software. Jungle playgrounds. Ski resorts. That kind of thing. Who knows how long she’d have? Electro-magnetic stimulation would maximally dilate her perception of time. From Sarah’s point of view, it might take a few weeks before she got an email with a high importance tag and the time of her mother’s death. There were stacks of leaflets at reception about how to handle the “purgatory” stage of the grieving process. That wasn’t the problem. Sarah was duty bound to her mother. She had been diagnosed as terminally ill before, twice, and twice healthcare advances had paved over those bottomless holes in the road. They had precisely zapped away a fine spread of cancer, then grown a whole new liver to replace one beyond repair. But the damage to her heart was far too entrenched. It couldn’t be fixed up or replaced. And now, only now, with black spots in her brain, did she asked to be hooked up. Each time before, with her mind in working order and after discussing it with doctors, video-link-psychiatrists and, of

course, Sarah, she'd firmly rejected the option. Sarah had a duty to that mother, the one she'd already lost.

"Okay," said Sarah. She pulled a pen from her pocket, tore out a blank page from the end of *The Silver Chair*. "Just in case, write your wishes down here, before you forget."

The old woman closed her fingers stiffly round the pen, wincing as she scribbled. "There," she said. Sarah tried to take the note, but it was pinned to the table beneath her mother's nails. "I'll keep it."

"Where? You'll put it somewhere and forget. Let me keep it safe. If there is any confusion about what you want, I'll make sure the right persons sees it."

Mother sighed and withdrew her hand. "I'm tired," she said, turning with a wheeze onto her side.

"Get some rest then," said Sarah. She leaned over her mother and pressed the recline button. "I'll be here when you wake up."

"I hope so."

Sarah walked out of the room, scrunching up the scrap of illegible writing before her foot was out the door.

The nearest lift was broken. A set of signs led her to another one, all the way on the other side of the building. She was about to step inside when something in the corner of her eyes caught her attention. She turned: an old man was at the other end of the corridor, waving at her. His hands were on a wheelchair, somebody slumped in it. Sarah held down the *Open* button and waited for the pair to make their way over. They took their time; her polite smile started to cramp.

"Thank you," they muttered as they crossed into the lift.

"What floor?"

"Ground."

“Oh. Already pressed.” The lift closed and began its descent. She stared at the wallpaper.

A grunt escaped the man in the wheelchair. It sounded to Sarah like something involuntary, but the old man holding the chair lent down and nodded at the grunt with a furrowed brow. The wheelchair person, he was old, too. Very old, Sarah realised, as she cast an eye over him. Older, even, than her mother. The man pushing him must be his son, she thought. He was halfway along the same route of decline, of greying and hardening, and this drew out other familial similarities too, in the dip and slope of their brow and nose, that may have lain unnoticed for years, before the son followed his father into degeneration. Was she so easy to spot as her mother’s daughter? The question sunk anxiously to the bottom of her; there was no good answer to that one, either.

The son listened intently as his father groaned into his ear. Something said directed his attention toward Sarah, who looked to the floor, embarrassed to be staring.

“Hi,” said the son.

This was not a period where people often spoke to strangers anywhere; least of all, the enclosed proximity of lifts. “Hello,” Sarah replied, “Can I help you?”

“Oh no, thank you,” said the man, “and sorry to pounce on you like this. We just thought we ought to ask. Do you know Ms Durnham?”

“Yes,” she answered, “I’m her daughter.”

The son smiled and squeezed his father’s shoulder. “We thought so. It’s Peter— Peter Simmons. And this is my father, *Roger Simmons*, of course. So thrilled to actually meet you finally.”

Sarah took his hand, then the frailer one beneath it. The two of them smiled at her and she at them, each party waiting for the other to fill the other in.

“So...I’m sorry, I am not placing you, actually, Roger,” Sarah said, “You are going to have to remind me.” Their smiles vanished. The son opened his mouth, but then said nothing. His

father beckoned him down. They conferred quietly. “Sorry,” said Sarah, whilst they whispered, “My mother forgets to tell me quite a few things these days, I’m afraid.”

“Roger Simmons?” the son repeated. Sarah shook her head and stood by, waiting and starting to feel annoyed, as the father croaked more unintelligible instructions to his son.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice rising just a little with irritation, “What’s going on? How do you know my mother?”

The son straightened up. “Well,” he said, “My father here has been in VR training with her. They’ve signed up for dual access to several scapes. But you must know that already.”

No. Sarah did not know that, because it wasn’t true. She’d been legally responsible for her mother’s decisions for years now. “That’s not her,” she told them plainly. “You’re thinking of somebody else.”

The father again beckoned his son’s ear back to his side.

“My father says...that he is thinking of a Mrs Durnham. And that she’s the spitting image of yourself. If we got the name right from just your resemblance, it is safe to say we’re thinking of your mother, no?”

“No. Not safe at all,” Sarah replied. She didn’t mean to sound so cold; these were just strangers, after all, but this man was calmly undermining her with the precision of a sibling. But how could he know her mother’s name? “I’d like to hear this from your father himself.”

“Oh, you’ll have to hear him through me, I’m afraid. He’s lost most of his throat.”

Sarah muttered an apology. Calm down, she thought. It’s not their fault. Somebody’s somehow confused them, although she couldn’t hazard a guess as to who or how. “Don’t worry, they met before my father’s operation,” said the son, as if that might be the problem. “They had plenty of time to get to know each other out here before they were together in there.”

“I’m sorry, I know what is going on with my own...” she trailed off. Look at the father, she thought. There were people older than him in the world, healthy people too, with healthy

brains. Working, even, a lot of them. The healthcare they could afford allowed them to keep doing the jobs that had made them so rich in the first place. But this man was the recipient of a lower tier of modern medicine: one that expanded life by spreading it as thinly as it might stretch. She eyed his dead grey skin. She knew the ins from the outs of bodies like his. His heart was feeble, his arteries hard and narrowed. He couldn't push his blood around fast enough to fuel the delicate processes of a properly functioning brain.

"You know what," she said, "You're right. I was getting confused. VR: virtual reality. That's what she's doing." She forced a smile together for him.

Roger summoned Peter back down and made a hissing sound. Peter nodded and returned Sarah's forced smile back to her. Then he tilted the two of them a few inches to the right, away from her. That was that then, she thought. Normal lift etiquette could resume. Good. She glanced at the little screen. Fifteen floors left. She'd have to talk to somebody that evening about this man and what contact he'd had with her mother. But she was done for the afternoon wasting her mind on people who had lost theirs. She had real, valuable work to be getting on with.

A cracking sound whipped around the walls; the lift tugged upward abruptly, the motion flashing up Sarah's legs whilst the rest of her continued downward. Her back hit the floor, knocking the wind out of her, and she let go of a barely audible cry. A whimper beside her: the father slumped in his chair, his wheels running back into his son, who was crumpled on the floor behind him.

"Christ," she gasped. She got to her feet and over to them, placed a steadying hand on the chair and offered the other to the son. "You okay?" He took her hand and lifted himself to lean on the wall, panting, his eyes closed, his free hand reaching out for his father.

"Dad?" he said, grasping the chair, "Alright?" The father gave an affirmative grunt and the son keeled over, bearing out the shock of his fall behind scrunched eyelids.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Winded,” he replied, “Nothing’s...I’ll be fine in a moment.”

Sarah stepped back to give them some space. She focussed on herself. More or less fine, she thought. Nothing out of place or broken. A bruise or two, maybe. The background hum of the lift was missing. “I suppose we’re broken down,” she said. She shuffled over and hit the emergency button, seemingly to no effect. She tried again, and again. It just popped back into position. “Hello?” she said into a mesh at the bottom. Nothing. With a sigh, Peter rose onto his knees and turned his father toward him, so he could lean on his armrest and whisper in his ear. Roger listened and nodded and grunted back, and so they went on, swapping mouths and ears in turn like children sharing secrets. Sarah was left with nothing to do except follow the rhythm of their conversation. At one point, she picked up her mother’s name during a whisper of Peter’s. Whatever he said drew together Roger’s wrinkles into a wide smile.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Can you talk to me? Do you realise we are stuck here? We need a plan of action.” But they didn’t stop. Peter put a flat palm between himself and Sarah like an official stopping traffic, and kept attending to his father’s grunts, acknowledging each one with a solemn nod.

“I’m sorry,” he said, turning to Sarah at long last. “My father doesn’t have a voice that you could understand, and I don’t want to exclude him. He has asked me to tell you something. He wants you to know he is going to die sooner than he would like. It’s a matter of weeks now. It occurs to him they will either fix this lift or rescue us whenever they are able to. In the meantime, our time is very precious. We would like to spend it with each other, talking about what matters. Is that okay?”

Fine, Sarah thought. Spending every moment together, filling up every silence, until the very end. What is the point of that? Do you drive departing loved ones to the airport? Do you

walk them to the gate, watch them get on the plane, meet their eyes through the window, wave as they take off? Why? How will that help, once they're gone?

"I'm sorry," she said to Peter. "Please, be with your father. I'll just wait."

"Thank you." Peter turned to Roger, met his eyes and said nothing. Maybe they've overdone it, Sarah thought. Perhaps they're running low on departing observations. But then she saw some silent exchange was occurring: an anguish furrowing each of their brows in turn, a query raised by a tilt of the son's head, followed by a small shake of the father's. Then, with a small nod from each, Peter drew a breath and turned back to Sarah.

"I'm sorry. I've avoided telling you this so far. I cannot any longer. I've met your mother myself. I see you're her daughter, as easily as my father can. She's younger, you see, where I've met her, or least she looks it. Everything my father says is true. I sense you suspect he's not all there, but you're wrong. He isn't all that sharp, perhaps, but he isn't confused in the manner he was for several years, as your own mother still is. It's VR therapy that has reversed his mental deterioration. Do you know what I am talking about? They explain it better than I can, but...the neurologists here are able to utilise their control over his sensory input in VR to build alternative routes for synaptic transmission, around damaged brain tissue. Your own mother has received lots of the same therapy; too late, I believe, to see significant improvement outside of the VR, but when she's in there and correctly stimulated... Well, that's the woman I have met. I have been hooked up, given my own avatar and introduced to your mother's and she's very lucid. Very engaging, too. All her faculties are in perfect working order inside the VR and so of course, that is where she wants to be. We were clearly mistaken in thinking you must know that."

Sarah had her face buried in her hands all the while he spoke. It was so tiresome trying to comprehend every twist and complication of what he was saying, when she just knew none of it was true. She would know if it was. She surfaced and there was Peter, nodding as if she'd

been thinking aloud. “I understand. If you are legally responsible for your mother, it must be very confusing,” he said, “But I think I might be able to guess what’s happened. VR therapy is now tried with a patient like your mother as a matter of course. Perhaps it was first done whilst you were absent, and I think— and this is what I felt unsure of telling you about— I think that as soon as an incapacitated individual’s faculties are verifiably restored, so it their autonomy, legally speaking. They regain the right to make all their own decisions automatically. I don’t make any of my father’s decisions anymore, although I did for several years. So, your mother will have been able to make her own decisions in the VR, without your consent.”

“How would she do that?”

“Well, I think she will have met some lawyers, and—”

“How?”

“I don’t know; she will have asked to. The lawyers get hooked in from remote locations. They have avatars, too. I’ve met lawyers in there myself. We reviewed my father’s will. He can speak properly in there. Very eloquently.”

“Right, right,” said Sarah. Peter opened his mouth, but she cut him off with a sharp look, behind which she quietly asked herself if there could be any truth to what he was saying. His story had some internal sense to it, at least. She tried to hypothesise alternatives, which were what? That this man, Peter, sane as he appeared, was either so mistaken or so devious as to mislead her about all this and in such great detail, having just chanced upon her in this lift? No. She could make no sense of that.

So, she was left to try and entertain Peter’s claim. She tried to bring a mother she’d lost into her mind, alive and well in some virtual resort. Which mother, though? Which had she reverted to? Which mother of Sarah’s would ever choose to stay hidden from her daughter in an impermeable somewhere else, as distant as the memory she’d left behind? Sarah squinted: a black silhouette swayed on the horizon.

She fell limp. Her mind tumbled.

“Are you all right?”

“Why hasn’t she told me?”

“I don’t know.”

“She never spoke to you about me?”

“Oh god, no, she did,” Peter said. He reached out and laid a hand on hers. “Every time I met her, she talked about you. And my father, he’s heard all about you. You run your own business, is that right?”

Sarah realised she was about to cry. She yanked her hand from Peter’s and covered her face and pressed her mouth down into her knee and didn’t let a sound escape her but she couldn’t stop the stifled sobs shaking her from her core. “Oh dear,” she heard Peter say, “I am so sorry. I don’t think...Maybe I shouldn’t have...”

Sarah let go of one more muted sob and then managed to swallow the rest back in. Her hands flopped down to her sides. She rubbed a sleeve over her eyes, took a breath.

“My mum,” and she found herself banging her chest as she said the words, “*My mum*... wouldn’t hide this from me. She would want me to know about it more than anything. That isn’t my mum you’re talking about.”

Peter stared at her a while, then glanced uneasily at his father. “Perhaps not,” he said. “I know what it’s like not to recognise a parent. The therapy might fix the problem, but it doesn’t necessarily reverse somebody to their previous state. My father isn’t the same man he was before he was diagnosed. Then again, neither am I. There might be...parts of the woman I’ve met that you wouldn’t recognise. Perhaps that’s why she didn’t want you to know she was there at all. I don’t know. All I know is that’s she’s a healthy, rational person who can make her own decisions. You wouldn’t think to try and take that from her.”

Of course, Sarah thought. He's worried I am going to the centre piece from his father's virtual swansong: my mother, her unspoiled wisdom dressed up in flawless, evergreen flesh. Who can blame Roger for wanting that?

Sarah realised she didn't doubt any of what Peter had told her anymore. No, she believed him. And that means, she thought, that hidden somewhere in that decrepit, spent body slumped in a wheelchair is the man my mother is going to spend uncounted aeons with. Hitting freshly powdered slopes, ducking behind waterfalls and disappearing into folds of acrylic sunlight. Whilst I work every day to run an empty home and spend my evenings planning her funeral.

"Richard." The old man's beady eyes, squinting through a corridor of slack flesh, took their time finding their way to hers. "Hello," she said, "There's a few things I want you to tell my mother."