

"This is the end," surmised my mother.

It was not difficult to fathom what she meant by this on that late August morning. Despite all remonstrations, she turned out to be correct – it was the end of her independent life. My mother, however, had meant something more melodramatic. And it was not that: it was but the beginning of the final end.

By the time the doctor had been and gone and had failed to diagnose anything serious; and then the nurse had been and gone and had diagnosed a stroke; and then the ambulance had been and gone and taken her away: a day and a night and a morning had been and gone. By which time, she had been reduced to a tottering ruin, with all the features of old age showing clearly in her face, and her control over her bodily functions shattered, much to her own shame.

But the ambulance crew paid no heed to her shame, and moved her efficiently to her first station along the road of her own Golgotha.

"Now, Jeannie, I'm just going to ask you some questions. Is that all right?" asked the young woman doctor, as we gathered around my mother's hospital bed, screened from the public gaze, but only just.

Miraculously, my mother's hearing had been restored to its former glory. If it was the end of everything else, it was the beginning of a new lease of life for her ears, which had been the cause of many fruitful arguments with the put-upon supplier of her hearing-aid. She said, clearly, "Yes, that's all right. But it's not Jeannie, it's Jeanne."

"Oh, sorry. Do you have any pains in your head, Jeanne?" asked the young doctor.

"No, none at all," she replied.

"Good. And what about your chest – any pains there?"

"No – no pain"

At that moment, it became evident that there was a second interviewee, for a shrill and cracked voice from beyond the encircling curtain replied: "Nae, nae pains in ma chest, doctor!"

Ignoring this, the doctor ploughed on.

"And what about your stomach – anything sore down there?"

"No," stated my mother decidedly.

"Ah've a wee pain sometimes in the morning, doctor, is that what ye mean? But it goes awa'," advised the voice from outside.

"Now, what about your hands and arms? Anything sore there?"

"No."

"Ma arms are jist fine, doctor. But ah've got these pains in ma fingers, ye ken, specially when it's cauld. Maybe ye could hae a look at them?" The curtain was poked at hand-height as fingers were thrust forward for examination.

The young doctor studiously ignored the intrusion.

"Now, Jeannie, I'm just going to feel your stomach, to see if there's anything that helps us. You won't mind?"

My mother was resigned to anything, and shook her head. I held her hand.

"You just go ahead, doctor," came the voice from outside, as a torso was pressed up against the curtain.

The doctor suppressed a giggle, and I snorted out loud. My mother looked suspiciously at us.

"And I want you just to wiggle your toes for us, Jeannie: first the left foot..."

My mother obliged. A lump in the curtain at shin-level showed us that my mother's doppelgänger was collaborating.

"...and now the right foot."

Both patients obliged.

The doctor patted my mother's hand. "Very good, Jeannie. Now there's one last thing I need to do. I'm going to tickle the soles of your feet and you'll tell me if you can feel anything. Is that all right?"

My mother nodded obediently. She was as docile as I had seen her in all my forty-eight years.

After a few seconds of puzzled silence, there was a wail from beyond the curtain: "But, doctor, ah'd need tae tak ma sokes aff! Och, wait a minute noo, ah canna tak ma sokes aff masel'. Nurse! nurse!" And with that, there was a shuffling of feet and the other old lady moved away. "Nurse! – Doctor wants me tae tak aff ma sokes! Nurse...!"

It was ironic that the bolt of lightning which really destroyed my mother came on the second night in the hospital, a second and massive stroke which deprived her of speech and of the use of her legs and most of her mind, and left her a different person from the one of only three days previously. A reverse metamorphosis – not shedding one personality, so much as enveloping the old one in an entirely new cocoon.

Perversely, it was in the next two weeks that I felt a deeper love for my mother than I had felt in at least forty years. She was not argumentative, she was weak and vulnerable, she was outcast from her home, she was innocently grateful to have me come and sit with her and read to her the get-well cards. No, maybe 'love' is not the right word – because it was mostly pity, and a burning desire to really, truly help her, as one might wish to help a small and harmless creature struggling against an insurmountable obstacle. On the other hand, who am I to make definitions of the word 'love'?

This phase did not last long, for the cold and wet and dark nights set in, and my mother described to me the burglars and the men of violence who had beset her home and were intent on breaking it and smashing up every single object she held dear. "They broke all my windows!" she shrieked, "And they're going to burn the house down when they come back! Tell them not to come back!" I decided not to interpret these literally, but to treat them as reports of the continued assault on her physical powers and dignity.

Or she told me that she had left the hospital for a walk the previous night, and caught a bus to the station from where she jumped on the cross-Channel train. And having reached the other side, she commenced to speak in German. For a whole day and two nights, she conversed with myself, my brother, the nurses and the doctors in German, to their great puzzlement. And then, just as suddenly, ceased to speak in any language at all.

The other five old ladies in the Ward were relieved, and did not hesitate to tell me how noisy she had been. Black looks were cast at her. When I bent down to kiss her goodnight, two of them sat in the corner and called her a dirty bitch, to be kissing her young fancy-man like that, in full view of everyone. The 'young', I liked.

Knowing her time to be limited now by a slow encroaching darkness, I wanted to put questions to her: what of her parents, her uncles and aunts, her grand-parents; whom had she loved; what had she seen in the dark days of the 1920s and 1930s. But her

mind was too far enveloped in the sparks and flickering images of a shorted brain and the images presented for admiration by drugs and the tedium of the hospital. It occurred to me that I was privileged to watch, for the second time, the slow demise of a parent.

My father worked once at Bletchley, part of a secret army with a mission to intercept, decode and understand the orders from the German Military High Commands. As far as I knew, for he was never a forthcoming man, he worked in translating the decoded messages, to render them from German into English. From electrical signals in the ether, to strings of letters on a page, to German, to English – how many steps to pull a communication from the sky. And sometimes the order would only be decoded days after it had been executed, leaving the people in Bletchley with a document of purely academic interest. When my father in his late seventies was transformed by Parkinson's Disease from a witty and quiet intellectual into a broken-down wordless wizened creature, I was not even left with the out-of-date communications. I thought I had lost all opportunity to ask.

It occurred to me only after his death that perhaps his disease was an example of cryptography in practice: who was I to say that he could **not** understand what was happening to him; perhaps he was simply incapable of translating from his own internal language back to an encoded form that other mortals could understand. And the reverse might equally be true: that our words were like the raw encryptions of the German High Command, and he lacked the boffins on the first floor to render them into comprehensible German. We were separated by at least one, and maybe several, levels of encryption.

From the Greek '*kryptein*', to hide: what a store of words we can find that expresses our relationships with each other and with the rest of the world.

Cryptography – the science of ciphers; cryptograms – messages rendered in code; cryptogams – flowerless plants, which have nothing to do with this, but whose students often ended up at Bletchley due to the inability of the military powers to read plain English; crypts – where we hide the dead or the old and infirm; crypto-communists – something they think we are or something we think we are?; cryptonyms – the secret names we have for each other; kryptonite – super stuff; cryptocrystalline – structures visible only under a microscope; cryptaesthetics – supranormal perception; and crypto-talented sons who keep it well-hidden.

My father's route to death was slower, and no less painful for all. There were days and nights of lucidity. The day Robert Maxwell died, I went to visit him in the public ward of a hospital that could only be described as being in Victorian condition. I mentioned the demise of Mr Maxwell, and was delighted to find my father not only responding with recognition, but telling me a story of how, when posted to Germany in the latter half of 1945, he had been asked to drive Maxwell from the Ruhr to Berlin: "and a more unpleasant man he had never met".

But within days of that conversation I saw him again, far beyond the reaches of my own transmissions, asking where the "dancing girls" had gone, in slightly breathless excitement. Was it a choice of words, simply, and did "dancing girls" mean something quite different – say, his spectacles, or a drink of juice? Or was it really dancing-girls he now regretted? If so, when had he been with them? No stories now for me - hidden secrets always.

In his final days, when – as far as we knew – he recognised no one and communicated with no one, other than the medical staff; did he in fact hear, see,

understand, but find it impossible to render his responses into words, looks, actions? Did he hold a grudge against us for abandoning him to death in this manner? What is the cryptography of Parkinson's Disease in its final stages?

And what cryptologist can understand the speech of an old woman afflicted by a stroke? My mother lost her speech and then slowly regained it. Frequently, the wrong words came out, selected almost at random by some mysterious short-circuit of the brain. On her better days, my mother knew the wrong word had been said, and laughed uproariously; or struggled painfully to find a word at all, and then gave up, with either a sweet smile or a frustrated cry. But, on the best days, and they were few, even these rather bizarre conversations could make the two of us laugh together, as she struggled to render a complete sentence and I jokingly filled in the gaps with the most unlikely suggestions. Was I mocking her? – I don't think so.

After three months in the hospital, my mother entered the nursing-home, dismissed from medical care without any further hope of recovery. False hopes were raised all round, as we persuaded my mother, and in a fragile manner, ourselves, that she would be well, comfortable, and "at home" in her own room there. The days of fooling ourselves did not last long, however, for she found the company of the fellow-residents too much to bear, and was reduced to a wreck sitting in the corner, wailing "No way - no way - no way!" for hours on end. I could sympathise with the position she had adopted: the rest of the residents were, by and large, completely unbearable or stared out their final days in various slack-mouthed and unseemly poses.

Why is it that we can find no dignified way of dealing with the old and decrepit? Many of us will end up just like those we try to avoid. We are dealing with people of seventy, eighty, ninety, with the bodily control and sometimes the mental capacity of small babies. Or are we? - can the mind stay sharp but lose its ability to code and decode? Are all the inmates of our geriatric wards and our nursing homes still of sharp intellect but rendered speechless? Where are our cryptographic skills when we most need them? We leave our old people in the care of others, turn our backs and do our best not to walk - or run - away.

So my father and my mother, both, ended their separate days in slow and painful decline, both sprightly and mentally alert individuals reduced to thin skeletons with their thoughts locked away behind layers of illness, lying in anonymous beds in rooms that were as foreign to them as anything else we could have dreamed up. On occasions, I would find my mother screwed up in odd positions on her bed, almost naked, her limbs like sticks, and I hated myself for every minute that she lived in this undignified manner. Had she not many times told us that she did not want a death like this? But what were we to do?

When the ends came, it was early morning. My father was gone in the twenty minutes between the hospital phoning me and my arrival; I was able to spend a few minutes with his still and cold body, behind a curtain, in a ward full of quietened old men who could only expect a similar final visit, in weeks or days.

My mother was already gone when they phoned in the early May morning. For two weeks previously she had taken no food, no liquid, only morphine; hanging on for several days beyond all expectation; and still capable of reacting to touch and sound; but there was no communication. And now they left me with her, her head like a thin

cold marble bust of her living image, utter silence, except for the shuffling of the remaining fellow-residents, curious outside her door. It was the end, for sure.

The transmissions had ended and I had not managed to crack the codes. I had not managed to find out whether there was life behind the masks in their final months. I had foolishly omitted to find out from them, while they lived, more about their brothers, sisters, lovers, parents, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents and others. How little I knew about my roots I only now realised, when it was too late. "History" and "Ancestry" I can read in the archives, but never hear the anecdotes, the crypto-history, from the lips of my older generation, which is now faded away in its entirety. We are the next, my children: get those Enigma decoders fired up now, and listen to what I have to say :