



Last Right

When a friend asked for help, I couldn't refuse. Her choice haunts me still.

By Carrie Carmichael

Last fall, a friend asked if she could jump out my 11th-floor window. She had esophageal cancer and was planning ahead. If the chemotherapy didn't shrink her tumor, and if surgery didn't offer her continued life, she wanted something "swift and certain." Pills wouldn't be an option if she couldn't swallow anymore. She didn't have a doctor to assist her dying, so injectible morphine would be harder to get. Five years ago, she was hit by a vehicle in Mexico. "The impact didn't hurt," she told me, and she figured that hitting the ground wouldn't either.

We had been very close for decades and shared the major events of adult life: children's births, divorce, career crises. Nursing her husband through his protracted death from colon cancer had galvanized her. She did not want to hang on to life after the prognosis was hopeless and her pain became unrelenting. We had just sat down to a lunch I had made for us when she asked. She wanted to jump out my window because she lived in a brownstone. Her chemo-necessitated wig, picked up that morning at a shop in my neighborhood, sobered me. This was not one of our hypothetical suicide conversations — this one was real. It took my breath away. I put down my fork and said, "Let's take a look."

My bedrooms and living room look out on West 72nd Street. In the master bedroom, I threw up the sash. A sidewalk covering in place during some building restoration had just been removed. She was glad it was gone, she said. Nothing to break her fall. But nothing to protect pedestrians either.

"You couldn't be in the apartment," she ordered. "The doorman would see you leave. I would have to be here alone." She didn't want me suspected of criminal behavior.

"We'll see what the chemo does," I said. "And then we'll talk more." I was devastated that a woman I loved was threatened with imminent death. I wanted to be a good friend, but asking me to help her commit suicide changed everything.

After she left, I had second thoughts about my swift acquiescence. This was hardly a casual request. Could I sleep in my room after my friend plunged to her death from my window? Could I enter and leave passing the place where her crumpled body had lain? Which of my neighbors, which of the toddlers in strollers and kids on scooters, would see her fall?

On the phone a few days later, when I told her that I was waf-

fling, she said just the offer was comforting. She felt calmer. We talked about other tall buildings with windows that open, as well as other options. Neither of us had experience with pills, injectible drugs or morphine suppositories. Nor did we know how much help she might need with any of them.

A few months passed and her life shrank. She moved south to live with her daughter's family. She slept much of the time, was racked with coughing and in more and more pain. My friend felt that as long as her pleasure in life was greater than her pain, she would choose to live. But she didn't want to wait until she didn't have the strength to take her own life. In February, I traveled to see her for what I knew would be the last time. "I've found a hotel with balconies," she told me during my visit. "Will you drive me there?" And I agreed. Since her family would inherit her estate, she didn't want them accused of hastening her death.

On the day we chose, her bag was packed and she was ready to go. As I drove onto the block, her daughter and family were saying goodbye. After they pulled away, we walked to the car. I opened the door for her. We put our seatbelts on. When we pulled up at the hotel, with the car in park, we hugged. Exchanged "I love you" 's. "If you change your mind, just call," I reminded her. We wept, and she waved goodbye as I turned and left. The ordinary act of dropping off a friend at a hotel was made extraordinary by her intention. I was the last person who loved her to see her alive.

When her friends heard how she had taken her own life, reaction was mixed. Shock at her method. Admiration of her courage. How could she do that? they asked angrily. What a legacy for her family. Thoughtless. Why didn't she cut her wrists in a warm bath? Why didn't somebody duct-tape her to her bed and find a better way? I kept quiet.

For my own part, I have asked myself why I did what I did. I didn't want to let her down. Although I gave her permission to take her own life, I feel guilty that I did not find an easier way for her to die. At the same time, I'm angry that she didn't use a gentler method, one with a more peaceful end. Something easier for her. Something much easier for me.

So far, no punishments. No rewards. But I am haunted. I'm not at peace. Will I ever be? I know my friend is where she wanted to be, on her own terms. She had the right to take her own life, and her loved ones were right to help her, but there should have been a better way. I am left with the legacy of my friend's desperation and the prospect of my own. ■

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