



Source: Ed O'Loughlin, with AFP, AP, 'Sharon defies odds and fears for his life', *The Age online*, 12/02/06.  
Tags: [child/parent](#), [death](#), [religion](#)  
Writer/s: [Anne Brennan](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

He finally asked to be taken to the hospice. His kids suggested that he might be more comfortable at home, but he knew it was not an option. When they brought him in he could still walk. They sat out in the rose garden with him in the early summer evening light. His hands, always so well tended, lay quietly folded in his lap. They were frail and thin now, the backs were covered in bruises where the cannula had been inserted at various times. When his children looked at them, they concentrated on the papery dryness of the skin, the only thing about them that was still the same. The light began to dim and they brought him back into the ward. He flinched when he saw the other patients, their faces caved in and their bodies motionless under the sheets. They noticed how slowly he climbed into the bed.

Within a week, he was 'no longer ambulatory', to use the nurses' phrase. They thought how, under other circumstances, he might have enjoyed that word 'ambulatory', with its slow unfolding syllables and its rather natty sense of a pleasant, aimless stroll about it. He had been a great story-teller, and a great coiner of words. Over the years he made a special name for each of them, and only a couple of months ago he had complained about the tendency of his parish priest to 'pondulate'.

They wouldn't have described him as athletic, despite having been a long distance runner in his youth. Nevertheless, movement was the thing that each of them associated with him. He was a man of the world, and he had travelled frequently. They always tried to be there at the airport when he returned, vying with each other to be the first to recognise his stocky frame as he descended the steps of the aircraft. He would be laden with little gifts: handfuls of foreign currency, the masks and slippers and tiny toothbrushes he would be given on the plane, collapsible wire toys from India, little wooden dolls from Japan. These, and the steady flow of postcards addressed to each of them individually, were the little bridges he built between the outside world in which he moved and their shared family existence. Above all, they remembered the sound of his footsteps, as individual as his voice, in the hallway at night as he moved from room to room to turn off lights and tell them all to pipe down and go to sleep. Somehow, now, although he had never been so consistently near, his stillness separated them from him more completely than any of his trips away had

done.

They brought in his mail and read out the cards and letters people sent. He would listen with his eyes closed, and then tell them to take the cards home again. He did not like to have them pinned up around his bed in the way the nurses suggested. Then, when flowers arrived, he would become agitated, and begged them to donate them to the chapel or at least to put them outside. He began to refuse to wear his own pyjamas, insisting on the hospital gowns that tied up down the back. In the end, even the presence of people became an intolerable burden, and he began to refuse to see visitors, apart from his kids, and sometimes they thought it was only because he didn't want to hurt them that he didn't tell them to stop coming, too.

The evening of his death, only one of them was present. The nurse had suggested that they take it in turns to keep watch, and that the others should go home to rest. She said that it might take days for him to die, and they needed to keep up their strength. Even then, his daughter was out of the room when he simply ceased to breathe. She felt sure that this had been deliberate. After all the indignities they had watched him suffer, she knew that this last act was his to make alone.

It took a long time for the family to reassemble, and during that time she waited quietly on her own with him. The nurses hovered tactfully outside. Later they would lay him out; they would light candles, place roses from the garden by his pillow and his rosary beads in his hand. During that time of waiting, however, he was allowed to lie there, the sheet drawn up to his chin. She could not quite take in the fact of his death and found it an effort not to believe that he was still breathing.

She thought about how he had gradually stripped the room of anything personal. The day before he had even asked her brother to take his missal home. She tried to think of one thing in the room that belonged to him now, and realised that the very idea was irrelevant. Not even she could be said to belong to him anymore. The idea made her feel forlorn. As the room darkened she sat with this feeling.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anne Brennan.*