



Source: Abraham Rabinovich, 'Hamas plans for peace in stages', *The Australian online*, 27/02/06.

Tags: [husband/wife](#), [disease](#), [death](#)

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The corridors of the hospice have been cleaned with bleach but there is still a smell of vomit and unchanged adult diapers that makes Mavis' throat tighten. She is walking slowly because her hip is giving her trouble this morning; normally she would be here before eight but it was harder than usual getting out of bed.

'Go on to his room. Arthur should be with the doctor already,' says Jenny at the front desk, as if chiding her.

Arthur had moved to the hospice ten weeks ago from home and now they were waiting for the cancer to take the final breath from his body. Prostate, it was, diagnosed just over a year ago now and since then it has been a rapid decline for her husband of 42 years.

Dr Barker is bent over, fiddling with one of the tubes in Arthur's arm, not noticing Mavis standing in the doorway. She is hesitant to enter. While he was still at home she was Arthur's full-time caretaker, but now there is not much left of him to call her own.

She clears her throat and Dr Barker turns his head.

'Morning, Mavis, I'm just administering the morphine. I'll be done in a sec.'

Dr Barker is dressed as usual in slacks and a golf shirt, the way of doctors these days. Arthur found it disconcerting at first. He said he couldn't tell the doctors from the janitors. Then the pain got worse and they started to up the painkillers. Since then Arthur barely makes any sense at all when he talks—most of the time he doesn't know where he is and he asks for things that Mavis can't bring him: like their boy, Joe, who died thirty years ago in Vietnam, or a plate of fresh apricots from the tree outside the house he had lived in as a boy. Mavis went to the grocery store looking for fresh apricots, but it was the middle of winter and all she could find were canned. It has been weeks since he has managed to get down solid food anyway.

Mavis stands clutching her purse while Dr Barker finishes up. Arthur's eyes are closed and the folds of loose skin on his neck almost swallow his face. His hair has all fallen out and his scalp looks like an egg—fragile and pale.

'How are you doing this morning Mavis?'

The doctor is pulling off his latex gloves and smiling at her, his eyes small behind silver-rimmed glasses.

'I'm alright Doctor. How is Arthur?'

Mavis wants to go over and pat his arm, but doesn't want to wake him up either. She waits, shifting her feet, for some direction from Dr Barker.

'Sit down, Mavis, let's talk about Arthur,' he says, and waves her in the direction of the armchair by the window, pulling up a stool for himself. Mavis is slow sitting and conscious of the twang in her hip, settling her thighs one after the other against the vinyl upholstery. Arthur's eyes are still shut. Dr Barker is flipping through his clipboard, as if it is going to give him the answer. He sighs and sets the papers down.

'There are a few ways we can look at it, Mavis. The cancer is metastasising rapidly and some of his organs are

shutting down. We can put him on life support to prolong things somewhat, or we can just let it take its course. The bone metastases mean he is in a lot of pain, but we can keep the morphine up to his system so the pain receptors are dulled. There aren't many other courses we can take.'

'How long will it be without life support?' she asks.

'Can't say exactly. It could be today, but probably this week.'

Mavis nods, concentrating to pull her face into the expression of a grieving wife.

'Arthur always said he wouldn't want to be on life support,' she says slowly, which is a lie.

Arthur never did say what he wanted one way or another—but she is finished with this business. The clever verbal gymnastics of doctors telling her in a million different ways what was happening without ever just saying, 'Your husband is dying. Soon he will be dead'.

'I'll let you be alone with him,' Dr Barker says, unfolding himself from the stool and clutching his clipboard, lunging toward the door and down the hall.

Mavis sinks back into the chair, and shuts her eyes. There is just the raspy breathing of her husband, the man she met at a swap meet when he wanted to trade his push mower for one of her handmade quilts.

'What kind of man wants to trade a lawnmower for a bed cover,' her daddy had said, but Mavis was thinking about his white teeth and his green eyes.

Mavis gets up slowly and drags the stool beside the bed, beside his barely concealed skeleton. She holds his hand but his eyes barely quiver behind their lids.

'Arthur, can you hear me honey?'

Nothing. She bends over and strokes his face, the wrinkles deep enough to lose a coin inside.

'I brought you something Arthur, some apricots.'

She has brought some canned apricots in a Tupperware, that she takes from the plastic bag and sets down on the bedside table.

'They're fresh from the tree outside your mother's house, Arthur, and they're golden-pink and juicy.'

Arthur's mouth barely opens, the white cracked skin of his lips forming an O.

'They're so sweet it just kills you Arthur. So sweet, they slide down your throat like sugar. I'll just get one for you to take a bite of.'

Mavis takes the plastic bag and pulls it tight over Arthur's mouth and nose. The blue plastic sucks in, but he doesn't struggle. It is easier than she thinks. She counts out three minutes exactly. She folds the plastic bag into squares and places it in her purse. She takes a deep breath, and presses the button for the nurse.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Eleanor Limprecht.*