



Source: Steven Erlanger, 'Sharon unleashes anger at protesters', *New York Times in International Herald Tribune online*, 22/08/05.

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'Your mother never complained', he said.

I said, 'Her breathing has changed'. Then I said, 'Her breathing has changed again'. She literally gasped for breath—pulling it in with such force that her mouth contorted and the skin around her mouth ruffled. One breath, a long wait, and then another breath, and nothing. Is this it? Then another breath. Then nothing. It was very ordinary, the difference between life and death.

Mum died at 2.25 p.m. on Friday the 1st of August.

It was now December and Dad and I were on holiday in New Zealand. It was my own fault. It was my idea. He always had a biro in his pocket, and he never stopped talking.

The first night of the holiday was pretty bad. And, it was my fault.

We were sharing a room. After an early tea, Dad went straight to bed; about 7.00 p.m. He was quickly snoring. I'm not going to be able to sleep, even with a sleeping pill, I thought. I took one, and went downstairs to see if there were any spare rooms. The office was going to be open until 10.00 p.m. I went for a walk, then back up to the room. Dad was up again now, in his underpants and too small dressing gown and I felt like partying. Three quarters of a bottle of scotch, too many cigarettes and a few tomatoes which we had in the fridge, and Dad is getting the bin from the bathroom and positioning it to catch the vomit dribbling down the side of the bed. I had tried to get him to say that I was the smartest of his children, but he wouldn't. I guess it broke the ice.

The idea was that we would go up north to Cape Reinga, the Northern most tip of the North Island and where, according to the story, Maori spirits of the dead leave for Hawaii. It was all down to Colin McCahon: 'the coast souls pass over on the way from life to death'. See the show, do the tour. I didn't have anyone to come with me, so I thought of Dad.

We were going to spend five days, a week or so touring. Then I was going on to a health retreat, and Dad was going to drive himself back to Auckland. I had booked the resort on the web. I was looking forward to the water therapies—I wanted to be hosed down. We visited on the way up. It didn't look promising. There was a sign on a timber frame structure 'Finnish Sauna'. But it wasn't finished yet, was it. And another thing—Dad was a lot older than I had thought. I realised that I would not be able to let him drive himself. It became apparent I was in for the long haul—it was going to be the long walk—this was not a holiday, but a spiritual journey, the stations of the cross. As I say, I blame myself.

We came to a halt at Doubtless Bay—named because Captain Cook had entered in his log 'Doubtless, it is a bay'. It was then that the anxiety kicked in. I knew what it was, and I knew what you had to do. Breathe through it. Take deep breaths. I did that. It didn't help. I got up at six the next morning, and smoked ten cigarettes looking at the diary to see if I could cut it short. We had two weeks to go. Dad was playing CDs he had picked up on the way of a song that he wanted played at his funeral (they used to play it at the end of dances)—'Now is the hour...for me to say goodbye. Soon I'll be sailing far across the sea'—we had a version sung by Dame Kiri and another by a Maori choir. We ate a lot of green-lipped mussels. I went swimming. We went to Cape Reinga with cousin Phil in his 4WD. Phil emptied his mind of its contents: Captain Cook and scurvy, Vitamin C, the Cabbage Tree and colic, the Sperm whale and ambergris, all about Toheroa and the bivalve in general, how good the ice-cream is, local industry, his hunting prowess.

There was a wide deck at the front of the apartment with steps leading down to the beachfront. It was late and dark, Dad was poking about, checking out the movement trigger mechanism on the outside lights. He had had a few. I heard a heavy thud. After a bit, I went to check it out. He was lying on the ground where he'd fallen. Maybe, he'd broken a rib. It made his cough worse—or rather coughing made it worse. And he coughed all the time. He'd always smoked. But now he wheezed and heaved and coughed and spat. I'd not spent that much time with him before now, not at such close quarters...I found it alarming. I thought he would die. My anxiety grew. Our anxiety grew. As the days passed we both had become less able. On the wall of the apartment there was, fittingly enough, a Colin McCahon style painting, a faux composite: 'let be. let be. will elias come to save him' was written in lower case lettering with 'NEVER' written emphatically in capitals.

'I was happy to be married to your mother. I never wanted anyone else'.

I took a photo of Dad under a Pohutakawa tree, with Colin McCahon. They could both recite the Bible.

We drove back to Auckland. I had to stop the car and do some deep breathing on the way. We had fish and chips for lunch. We made it through Christmas with a few more pill party wild acts, and then on Boxing Day took the flight down south, which was hairy enough. In Ashburton we went to the cemetery, which looks in the direction of the Southern Alps, and chose plot No. 3491.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Robyn McKenzie.*