Six Days of Pritchett

Thursday

I had to squeeze Mr. Pritchett into an already full afternoon, not uncommon in the hospice world where remission flakes out on its proposal and becomes more of a one-night stand. As nurse case manager, my job was to explain the rest of his life: his care team, pain management, transitioning from the solids he still ate to the pabulum, the cans of Ensure and later, the juice directly injected into his weakened veins. When I got to that part, he shook his head. I told him that even patients who were needle –phobic didn't mind them once swallowing became too difficult.

"I don't care about needles," he said. "But I'm not sleeping anywhere but my bed." He pointed to a half-closed door down the short hallway of his small apartment.

Pritchett was a handsome man, a rarity among our clients. A long time ago I chose to believe that when terminal illness and advanced age coincide, they conspire in an almost kind way: disease helps transform the decaying body into something more easily surrendered. Kafka's cockroach in *Metamorphosis* came close to explaining it. But here was Pritchett: trim and graceful. Blue-grey eyes that seemed no less engaging or beautiful than those of a 20-year-old; good posture, articulate. He was nearing 79.

I explained that the care team had to walk all the way around a bed with wheels to hook up IVs; they needed hydraulics to raise and lower him. "Not now," I said, "maybe not this week or next, but you will be moved to a mobile bed."

He asked if I'd seen anyone who was happy to move into a bed on wheels.

"I do initial counseling; I won't be here later in the process."

“You mean when I’m dying on a roll—when the going gets good.”

I nodded.

“How much does all that cost? Let’s say if I last another month?”

I told him not to worry. He had insurance and the government reimbursed the rest.

“I’m not worried!” he growled. “It makes no sense to keep me drugged and fed another 30 days. For what? I’m not going to get better.”

Last year I would have politely argued with Pritchett, citing the benefits of palliative care. But after my father’s slow wasting, I knew better. Had he been able to ask for a quicker end, I would have risked a life behind bars. Unlike my father, Pritchett still had his faculties. I’d asked myself ‘for what?’ every day for the last 10 months.

“I don’t have a lot. But I’ll leave half of it to you if you help me.”

My silence was his invitation.

“First, contact my daughter and tell her this is it. Ask her to see me before I’m moved to that glorified gurney. If she refuses, you tried.”

“We don’t do that type of—”

“And two: after she visits or refuses to, leave me something lethal, while I can still put it in my mouth.”

My phone slid off the folder on my lap.

“Don’t answer now,” he coughed. “I left her name and phone number on the kitchen counter. Pick it up and take it. No obligation, no hard feelings either way.”

Killing someone and providing the weapon are two different sins. Not that I believe in sin, really. I believe in ethical and moral treatment which, depending on how I looked at

it, this job both allowed for and lacked. Call it justification or convenience, but I lied to him by omission.

For 20 years I *was* the nurse at the end. I'd seen thousands of people and their families suffer. Although the occasional abusive patient or relative reminded me that the other side might be preferable to their psychic pain, I staunchly opposed euthanasia until I saw the only person I loved, maybe more than I'd loved my mother, in months-long agony.

My case manager position was not a promotion. It was to get me the hell out of the end game. I'd done my hands-on, put my hands in enough bile and shit, blood and foul matter that bent me over buckets and sinks. Twenty years. And then these last few to manage *cases* – an apt description for my arms-length dealings with death. I was the meeter and greeter of people whose pain was still manageable, most of whom could reason.

Like Pritchett. Yet Pritchett didn't seem as psychologically manageable as the rest. I admired that.

"It's around 100 grand. If my daughter wants to talk to me or not, I'll leave her half. But that's a nice bit for you."

"I don't normally talk to patients this way, but you're pretty nervy asking me for this—assisted death."

"I never thought about it that way. Your assistance? It's like putting booze in a cupboard, knowing the alcoholic can reach it but you wouldn't pour it down my throat."

Right then I liked him. With effort, he stood up and ambled down the hall toward the half-closed door. Before pushing it open he looked over his left shoulder, his pain palpable: "It's on the kitchen counter, her name and phone number. Take it. You can decide to chicken out later.

I walked into the kitchen, an early seventies décor if you could call it that, dingy but not filthy. An envelope with my name on it was propped against a dusty percolator.

After work, I opened the envelope. Pritchett's handwriting was not only legible but beautiful. A female who answered the phone sounded like she was in a hurry to meet her girlfriend at the mall. I asked for Kathryn Browning. "That's me!" her voice giggled. I thought she might call me a silly goose.

I told her I had a message from her father. She interrupted: "You must be Linda from hospice."

My confusion flipped to irritation. She gushed that she was working for Mr. Pritchett and needed to give *me* important information. When could we meet?

"No thanks," I said and hung up.

Friday

When I got to the office, a plump, late-30s Kathryn sat in the lobby. "So sorry he lied to you. What I have to say is important."

"Not to me," I said and I heard her footsteps follow me down the hall.

"At least he didn't put you on the spot," she said. I kept walking. "Believe me, you want to know this!"

I stopped at my office threshold and turned to face her while blocking her entrance.

"May I have two minutes?" her eyes pled. "Then you won't ever have to talk to me again."

"I have a meeting in six."

She followed me in and waited for me to sit down. Then she sat.

“Pritchett is your father.”

I smiled. “Nope. I had a wonderful father who died last year.”

“No,” she said firmly, “he was, biologically, your stepfather.”

I felt immediate hatred toward this woman. “Who the hell are you? Get out of here!”

She didn’t move. “I’m sorry Linda. Pritchett asked me to find you and luckily you still live in the Atlanta area. When he found out his cancer was inoperable, he made arrangements with your hospice because he wanted a chance—”

“No, I have a dad! I had a dad, not a stepfather!”

Kathryn waited for me to lower my shoulders and breathe evenly. Then she placed an accordion folder, the old-fashioned kind that fastens with string, on my desk. “He wants you to have this: a few photos and your mother’s poetry.”

My mother’s what? I couldn’t move my hands from the arms of my chair.

She didn’t pause. “You can go to the courthouse, look up your parents’ marriage license: 20 months after you were born.”

I concentrated on helping reason cut a path through my stupor.

“He’s willing to take a DNA test now or post-mortem for you.”

I was lightheaded. Kathryn, Pritchett, the folder, the courthouse—all of this seemed plausible.

“Then, why didn’t he tell me yesterday?”

“He thought it wouldn’t be, well, I suggested it might be too stressful. This is intense—understandably—and he’s not even here.”

“So, he’s a coward?”

"We agreed I could explain it and be a buffer. That it might feel worse, initially, coming from him."

We sat, silent. After what could have been an hour or a few minutes, she apologized for the pain she caused me and held out her hand. "Here's your check." Fifty grand.

Before she opened the door, she looked over her right shoulder, "Oh, and another check is coming… I don't know how much, but he said to remind you about the other favor."

I knocked on his door after work, not expecting Nancy, one of our nurses, to open it. We looked at each other, surprised. I quickly realized I needed to explain myself. "Mr. Pritchett forgot to sign one of the contracts yesterday."

"He's sleeping right now. They moved him up on the schedule; had a rough night."

It was against the rules, but I told Nancy that she could take off early. I'd sit with him for the remaining two hours of her shift. "You're the boss, or close enough," she winked and handed me his chart.

As soon as she left, I opened Prichett's door a crack and saw him on his back, eyes open. I thought of Kafka. "You didn't waste any time after signing the contract, I see."

He didn't smile but turned to look at me. I sat on a chair close to the door.

"I didn't think you'd come back, but I wouldn't blame you…" he looked like he was going back to sleep.

"I came to give you back your check."

His eyes were again wide. "Only money. It's nothing to me."

"I also came to ask you about my mother. Why you didn't stay; did she want out or was it you?"

"I knew she wouldn't tell you anything about me. I wouldn't have. I was an asshole. No, actually," he exhaled slowly, "an asshole is very useful."

I wasn't going to argue but I wanted facts, not opinions or regret.

He asked me for water. I held the glass while he sipped through a paper straw.

"I wanted her to abort. Imagine. I'm telling you I wanted you dead." And he chuckled, then coughed.

"She said she would. We had plans to go to Black Mountain College. I wanted to paint and she wanted to study poetry with Robert Creeley. You've heard of Black Mountain?"

I nodded. I'd been through the accordion folder, found the acceptance letter and 14 handwritten poems, a few in good shape but as many faded or crumbling. In a pocket near the back, two thin journals. One was mother's personal journal filled with scribbles of starts and scratched out verse; the other was a 1956 issue of *The University of Kansas City Review*, where two of her poems appeared.

"It was summer of '55. Rumors that if we didn't go soon, it would close." He sighed. "And it did two years later."

"She said she'd abort so what happened?"

"She went to New York to stay with an aunt for a couple weeks, but I didn't hear from her for two months. I bought a bus ticket, found her and she was already showing. Told me to get out, move on. I was hurt and angry, so I did."

"How'd Black Mountain work out?"

"I never went."

Saturday and Sunday

I wasn't sure I'd go back to Pritchett's. Not because I held a grudge. I didn't know how to return his check. He'd fallen asleep and as far as I knew I was his only relative. I didn't want to call Kathryn and I wasn't going to leave the check on his nightstand.

For two days I read and reread mother's poems, hoping to bring some part of her I never knew back to me. I'd read Sylvia Plath and Gwendolyn Brooks in college, not that I understood everything, but I appreciated what I could. Thirty years later, here I was, researching female poets published in the early 1950s, my mother's possible inspirations: Edna Vincent Millay, Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich. Their work had immediate and concrete intimacy, "confessional" the experts called it. "Modern Oath," by Lillian McMillan—it seemed strange to see her maiden name in print—seemed a nod to a Millay's "Modern Declaration."

Modern Oath

I, having loved lilacs and fireflies,
the fine curl of my mother's script,
her lips and books
bound by my father's leather hand;

Never having to choose between
or deny them
like the earth and sky;

Then you appear to me an ocean

taking the form of a glass

so I drink, refreshed;

Never having declared or denied

my thirst,

always wanting, unafraid to ask

You, without apology or conniving smile

no matter who breaks,

no matter who wins the war.

Mother drowned in the Atlantic's undertow off Tybee Island in 1965. We were on vacation and I should have remembered more than a blonde woman wrapping a towel around me, whisking me inside a hotel, offering me a Shirley Temple as I shivered and told her about my cat back in Atlanta. I should have remembered my father yelling for my mother, running out to try to save her, screaming for help. But I don't remember anything, even getting home, until her funeral and the wake, where people sat looking helpless in my living room.

For two days I thought about two fathers—I refused to think of my dad as my stepdad—the one I knew and loved, now dead; the one I didn't know who'd lobbied for my death 57 years ago, dying. It seemed that fate got bored with my wardrobe and overnight

constructed an entire line of irony. A hidden closet whispered, *Please, unwanted and unloved daughter, help kill me.*

I tried to put myself in Pritchett's place. Had he changed? Who was he in the first place? How much had I changed? Why hadn't I wanted children? Would I have aborted if I had to choose? Was he simply using me now? Did it fucking matter?

Monday

I decided to check in on him. A nurse named Marcus, apparently a new hire, greeted me. I identified myself first by work title and second as the patient's relative. I could hear Pritchett but he sounded frail, "Is that you, Linda?"

I walked past Marcus before he gave me gave me a nod. The dining area off the kitchen housed the wheeled deathbed. Pritchett was on morphine already, wrapped like a baby in white linen arms. I sucked in my breath and walked to his right side. I decided to sit on the bed, sheet and thin blanket separating us.

"This isn't so bad," he said, with heavy-lidded eyes.

"I told you," I said, confused by tears starting to blur his image.

"You lied. Said you wouldn't be here when the going got good."

"No," I shook my head, "I think that was before—"

He turned his head to look at me, seeming to concentrate: "I've always hated people who feel sorry for themselves. Here I am doing it."

"It's okay," I put my hand on his wrapped chest.

"I'm not sorry I'm dying. I'm sorry I missed out. Thinking some imagined life without you would be better than… being your father."

I withdrew my hand like a child who grabs a stranger's hand instead of his parent's. What the hell was I doing? What was *he* doing, asking for me, asking anything of me? Especially to be here for him at the putrid, grueling end.

His arms were trying to struggle free now, as if he were desperate for my touch. I walked out, mumbling goodbye to Marcus.

That night I dreamed that my father dug himself out of his grave. He stood at my door, his funeral suit shedding little clumps of dirt.

"How did you get out?" I demanded.

He laughed at me the same way he did when I lied about getting drunk at prom.

"Only you know the truth," he said, as he tried to get into my house. But I wouldn't let him in.

Tuesday

I called Kathryn at 7 a.m. and told her to meet me at the Starbucks next to my office at 9. She appeared less chipper this time. I wanted everything. All the details about her and Pritchett.

She was the granddaughter of James Price, Pritchett's partner who died of Aids-related pneumonia in 2007. Price was a writer and former Poet Laureate of North Carolina.

"You said you worked for Pritchett. Or are you family?" I wasn't sure where my questions were coming from or where I was going. Were she and Pritchett buddy-buddy? Was she his surrogate daughter, helping assuage his guilt? Did she love him like she might have loved her grandfather? Or did she need Pritchett's money?

“I found you as a favor. He was always good to my granddad. They were together 11 years. I was still in high school when granddad came out. My mom didn’t want anything to do with him, but I didn’t judge him. The more I got to know Pritchett, the more I trusted him.

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t much like Pritchett right off the bat. He doesn’t try to be likeable. But he’s always been trustworthy. Tells the truth. Is direct. There’s something to be said for that, right?”

“Have you seen his will?”

She narrowed her eyes.

“I’m being direct,” I offered.

“I haven’t and I don’t know if he’s leaving anything else to me.”

“‘Anything else?’”

“Granddad left a sizeable estate to Prtichett. Old family money. Nothing to mother, his only child. Before she could contest the will, Pritchett gave her 75 percent of everything including all the land and property, some North Carolina beachfront and some near Asheville, Black Mountain area. He kept a modest annuity for himself and a small savings account they’d opened together.” She took a long sip of coffee. “I fought my mother on fighting Pritchett for the rest of it. Nothing would make up for her disapproval of her dad’s lifestyle or the fact that he wanted her to have nothing.”

“Where is your mother now?”

"Not even on her damned property! In a very expensive holding tank for Alzheimer's patients in Buckhead. She has diabetic kidney disease to boot. So much for her sense of fairness," she blinked back tears.

I told her I was sorry and I meant it. Like me, Kathryn was single, an only child, lost in her work and motherless. Unlike me, she had the burden of visiting a body that resembled her mother; she'd endured a decade as dutiful daughter and power of attorney despite her mother's verbal and more recent physical assaults. And yet, Kathryn was working without complaint to establish her business and I felt happy for her. Before we parted two hours later, she told me she gave up a son who would now be 19. Soon, she would find the courage to find him.

I started to head back to work, but I was already three hours behind. *Lilacs and fireflies, earth and sky*… their *war,* my conception. Who had broken first?

I drove to Pritchett's where I found him sitting up, glasses on, reading the *Atlantic*. He nodded. I said hello and looked for his caregiver.

"She was going to buy some coffee, but she's been gone over an hour," he closed the magazine. "I don't mind."

"I'm glad you're doing so well today," I tried to hide my nervousness. I was rarely nervous and my awareness added to it.

"Yes, they call it a last rally," he motioned for me to sit in a chair to his left. Someone on his care team had angled the bed to catch the best light through the small dining room window. His face looked even younger, his eyes bluer than five days ago. "But you know all about that."

I was grateful to talk about something less personal. “A few people have them, most don’t. I’m still surprised by families’ attributions. Either it’s a miracle healing or a gift from God. Answered prayers. We try to tell families at the beginning about rallies, so they don’t ride a euphoric wave only to crash even harder in a day or two.”

He nodded. “You look like your mother, the way she held her head when explaining something that mattered to her. Even more, you *sound* like her – her syntax and rhythm.”

“I wouldn’t know. She’s hard to remember. After you saw her pregnant with me in New York, did you speak to her again?”

“No. I mailed the *Kansas City Review* to her, the one you now have. She should have received it the month you were born. I congratulated her and encouraged her to keep writing.”

“I was nine when she died. I’ll never know if she kept it or anything from you.”

“That’s not important. I had hoped that you had some of her poems, that she’d kept writing, but now, that’s not important.”

“I don’t know if she wrote after I was born. Dad gave me photos and some jewelry. When he died, I found nothing but his things in the house. Did mother write back to you, ever?”

“No. I didn’t expect it. But I thought I saw her boarding a train with you once, or maybe I was rallying because I missed her and wanted to see her. A woman and a girl about five or six boarding a train in Durham, North Carolina.”

“Coming back from grandmother’s. My father’s mother lived there. We visited twice a year.”

He looked sad, as if he had hoped for 50 years that my mother and I were a mirage, not a lost opportunity. He aged instantly and I resumed my work identity, aware that his rally could end any moment.

"Yesterday, you tried to say you were sorry you weren't around to be a father—I was here briefly."

"Yes," some of the sadness drained away, "I was in pain, somewhat drugged but I remember. You left quickly."

"I… I heard you and believed you, but I couldn't block a surge of anger. It came on suddenly."

"Maybe that's *your* last rally?" he looked earnest, as if he knew how delicate a thing truth is and that most of us wrap it in sarcasm, wit or irony because we are all so afraid of its power.

"I don't know... I want to be mad that you waited so long to find me. That you haven't said, 'Hey, Linda, I'm sorry—for *you* not just for *me*—that I wasn't around. Hey, Linda, I'm sorry you have to see me like this. Linda, I love you.'"

Pritchett didn't look surprised or shamed. I sucked in a deep breath and shook my head. "I don't… I didn't mean that last part, really."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Important thing is you said it. To me. While I'm here."

I scooted my chair nearer to him. "Kathryn said it's easier to believe she's doing her son a favor by keeping her identity a secret."

"No arguments here," he lifted his hand from his lap and moved it toward me. I took it.

"She said she has to expect nothing but rejection, maybe hatred at first."

He leaned all the way back into his pillow as if he'd found the perfect resting spot.

"She said the worst would be indifference. If a birth parent didn't matter enough to even dislike."

"I'm glad you got angry and left," he said, "but even happier that you're here today."

His eyes closed as the little window's light dimmed with the setting of its source. I put my other hand on his forearm and stroked it the way I'd comforted my father.