

Advent ✨

Having surrendered comforts of dignity, we held hands. Death claimed so many souls, some aged and willing; others young and tragic – while we held hands, waiting.

The banner and haiku are the untangling of a nearly 15 year walk through Alzheimer's disease with my mom, who lived for over 10 years at the House of Loreto, a Catholic nursing home in Canton. During her final few years, she no longer spoke words and rarely opened her eyes. In January 2018, at age 89, her ability to swallow failed, commencing a final, 7-day vigil.

I snapped the photo on Day 7, about 12 hours before her death. An urgency came over me; fumbling with my phone, trying to steady it in just one hand, bleary-eyed from resisting sleep.

The call for Advent banners triggered something – a soft nudge to spend time with the photo and review my scribbles from that week, still difficult reminders of grief and unanswered questions - and the unravelling began in earnest.

The mysteries revealed during those long days and nights now have settled into patterns of grace, illumining the preceding years in a more gentle way.

What a privilege to receive notice, time, and space to experience her holy transformation.

✨ Claudia Amrhein

Day 1. “Got the call that Mom’s not swallowing again, started last week. She’s in bed on oxygen, no more food and just small amounts of thickened water. Her breaths are short with long spaces in between.”

*Each breath, a kite tail –
A breezy ribbon of time.
We fly now ~ hold tight!*

“... I asked her if she was in pain? NO. (She spoke!) Are you hungry? NO. Do you see Jesus? ... She opened her eyes, moved her face toward me and said, YES. The priest came and gave her last rights with Sisters Jeanne, Merilee, and Janet present. Then Harry blessed her.”

*Beckoned, she lifts up.
Her eyes, deep brown rivers rushing,
Splashing at the shore.*

Day 3. “Mom is restless, pulling off her oxygen mask, fidgeting, grabbing. Vitals still good. Sitting with her, trying to calm her, visiting with staff who come to say goodbye. It must be close.”

Day 4. “Days and nights run together. Jack comes and brings clean clothes, he’s down, I’m down, as is Spencer. Waiting is hard, but waiting apart is harder.”

*Fear, doubt’s agent, lands.
Death’s claws grip its sentry perch –
Abide Kingdom Dwellers!*

“...The nurses, aides, and nuns take such good care of her, they are so kind and gentle. Patient care every 2 hours, round the clock. I’m anxious, feel like I should be doing something. I’m afraid I won’t be ready when it happens.”

Day 5. “There’s a rhythm forming in my time here, I’m not as restless now even though I’m up at all hours and all I do is sit. It’s like the monastery, the

cycle, which never ends here – 24/7/365 - someone is always working, caring for her. Somewhere in the world monks are chanting; saints always in motion.”

“Harry came again and blessed us. Mom is sleeping now, not grabbing or pulling off her mask anymore. She is so strong! Her vitals are still really good.”

*Noble procession ~
Resplendent tears pierce, alight;
Diamond showered realm.*

Day 7. “Mom passed away tonight just after 9 p.m. Around 5:30, the strangest thing happened. Her breathing changed, became deeper somehow and she looked straight up – opened her eyes wider than I’ve seen in years – and stared straight ahead for a few seconds. She was raised up at her neck – it was so strange to see her move like that and to see her eyes, though they looked right through me.”

“... The nuns flocked in, surrounding us, saying prayers in unison. I cried the whole time, just sobbing into her hands. Then, her breathing became normal again and one by one, they left.”

*Sacred bond, seal us.
Radiant stars, lucent eyes ~
Cherish, heal, believe.*

“... We were alone for a few more hours. It was dark, but I could see it coming. I kissed her forehead and said I love you Mom over and over and over and when she looked different, I rang for the aide. She became completely still.”

✨ Many thanks to Michele Waalkes and Connie Collins for helping to bring the banner to life.



Her hand ~

warm, ageless.

Stars keep vigil;

snow falls, a

splendid robe

unveiled.

Advent

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For just shy of 15 years, my Mom lived with Alzheimer's disease.

During her final few years, she no longer spoke words and rarely opened her eyes.

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at
Before Alzheimer's, my Mom was a healthy, active, beautiful woman. Once the disease took hold, it slowly and methodically reversed every aspect of her

Death claimed so many souls, some aged and willing; others young and tragic – while we held hands, waiting.

A final, 7 day vigil with my Mom, who lived with Alzheimer's disease for just shy of 15 years, opened my eyes to the mysterious privilege of receiving notice, time and space to experience her holy transformation from life to death.

I snapped the photo of us holding hands on Day 7, about 12 hours before Having surrendered comforts of dignity, we held hands. Death claimed so many souls, some aged and willing; others young and tragic – while we held hands, waiting.

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The simple beauty of holding hands. An expression of assurance, safety, love, and certainty flows from one to another in this simple act.

We cannot know what the future holds. I didn't know that my Mom would live for nearly 15 years with Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's had eroded every ability and trace of personality that made my Mom the beautiful and loving person she was.

So during her final years, we held hands.

After living with Alzheimer's for just shy of 15 years, her ability to swallow failed, commencing a final, 7 day vigil.

We held hands while waiting for death to come, my Mom and I. After living with Alzheimer's for 14 years, her ability to swallow finally failed. The doctor predicted she would pass quickly, but her work was not yet done. I snapped the photo on Day 7, about 12 hours before she passed.

I have come to know that this time spent in steady, watchful vigil was a gift to me. During those dark, still winter nights, I experienced mysteries I cannot explain. These memories spill out in unexpected bursts of insight, beautiful words that calm and reassure that all will be well. What a privilege to receive notice, time, and space to experience her holy transformation. Claudia Amrhein