

## Dying before Lunch: The Mature Single and Meetings with Mortality

Our least favorite topics? Death and taxes. Founding Father Benjamin Franklin recorded in a letter in 1789, [“In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”](#) if faced with only these two alternatives, I’ll take taxes.

[Boomers don’t believe in death](#). Committed to our longevity, [Fitbits](#) attached, we’ll do whatever it takes to avoid the very last and final lifecycle event, just like children playing hide-and-seek by covering their eyes. But [meetings with mortality](#) wait in the wings for us, single or attached. Even when we’re fortunate enough to find our rest-of-life partner, we’ll have both his and hers endings to deal with—unless we can manage to expire quickly, simultaneously, and painlessly on a cloud of [marijuana smoke](#).



Death and dying are all in a day’s work for anyone who earns their taxable income in a hospital setting, so every work day for this mature single involves meetings with mortality.

At 12:05, just when I’m beginning to visualize the contents of my pink polka-dotted lunch cooler, I get a call for 3 Surg. The [Palliative Care Team](#) is joining the medical team to inform the patient that despite all medical treatments, his liver and kidneys are failing. The patient is only forty, a strikingly handsome man with sharp features and black hair. His dark brown eyes are turning yellow. His wife is huddled in an armchair, as if a chill has entered the hot, stuffy room. We find out that she just finished chemotherapy for breast cancer two weeks ago .

One of the hospice doctors has an impish face and looks at least twelve years old. With braided hair and a dirndl, she could be the Vietnamese Heidi or [Pippi Longstocking](#). She is explaining in her soft voice what they can do to get him home and help make him comfortable so he can enjoy the time he has left with his family. Another doctor says she will write a letter to help his mother get a visa, so she can travel thousands of miles to be with her dying son.

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The attending physician, who at least looks slightly older than twenty-one, explains why she does not recommend a resuscitation protocol for him, or life on a ventilator. She knows that once she takes out the catheters that are causing him so much discomfort, it could be a matter of days.

The patient struggles to absorb the verdict while his wife huddles in the corner, her back literally up against the wall. They were hoping to hear that the medical team had stabilized his condition. So much for hope. Finally, he sighs and says it was inevitable. He just wants to go home to his little farm. Even though he knew he was ill, he felt well there. It's in God's hands, he says. As much as he wishes that none of this were happening, it's up to God.



He sounds like the woman in the [dialysis treatment center](#) with the profile of an Aztec princess. She has nine children and is thanking God that they're all well-behaved, hardworking, and getting an education. Or the sturdy woman in workout clothes who is studying to be a preacher. She cleans houses for a living, does all of the cooking, shopping and housework for her family, takes care of her grandchildren, shleps her youngest teenager to school events, and is sending an older child off to college. She's now taking in a blind, diabetic, incontinent 74-year-old relative of her stepfather who is in recovery from a stroke and requires care 24/7. He has no one else, she says. God will give her strength.

There's a saying from World War I that there are [no atheists in foxholes](#). Watching a dying man in his forties wrestle with his fate, it occurs to me that all the atheists I know are solidly upper-middle-class, healthy, and intellectual. To be fair, they've also suffered profound losses in their lives. And atheists can die with great courage and dignity, as witness [writer Christopher Hitchens](#), who detailed every step of his one-way journey for [Vanity Fair magazine](#) as he was dying of esophageal cancer. Still, I've never heard a single patient say, "Thank Nothingness" or "If Random Chance wills it."

I myself am the child of atheists. My father was so adamant in his non-belief that I called

him the “Orthodox atheist.” In my mid-forties, I decided to participate in a group [adult bar/bat mitzvah](#), since I hadn’t had one when I turned thirteen. [Cantor David Unterman](#) of blessed memory, was a wonderful teacher who led us into the sanctuary singing [Follow the Yellow Brick Road](#). His contention was that anyone who believes or cares about something greater than their own desires isn’t really an [atheist](#). A belief to which the atheists I know would take great offense.



On a rush of feeling from the latest inspiring film, [PBS special](#), or self-actualization workshop, we admonish ourselves to treasure each moment and live every day as if it were our last. But do we? Because we’re sure that it isn’t. I know I should live every moment in awe, gratitude and wonder, but my latest allergy attack, upset stomach, and failure to lose five pounds are more than sufficient fuel for [kvetching](#), (and it’s important to stay in practice). It’s the greatest gift of all-the luxury of a life where I can afford to let trivialities upset me, as if they were the overwhelming experiences that others are facing—including the final experience.

Sometimes we catch a break, whether we choose to thank a deity, science, and/or chance. I stop in at Pedi ICU and find out that the desperately and mysteriously ill child in 7B has been diagnosed and treated for meningitis, and is recovering without brain damage. His mother had described him as a slow, shy, sweet child with severe learning disabilities and an [IEP](#). She proudly and gratefully announces that he’s just the same as he was before he almost died.

Then I get out my pink polka-dotted cooler and eat lunch.

