

Of loss, death and dyeing

By Ruth Ostrow

"I THINK you need a darker colour, to cover the grey," says my mum, sitting on my bed. She's been talking at me in my semi-sleep, telling me she's just finished doing a hair colour on herself.

I can barely lift my lids, but have a strong view on it. "I have a black cover-stick for the in-between times," I mumble, opening my eyes. "But the greys do show through," I say, sitting up to have a full-on conversation about hair dye.

It's odd to be talking about hair dye at 7am with one's mum. Odder because I'm here in her home for a very sad reason. My young cousin died over the weekend. In her early 40s, with a beautiful daughter of seven, she was diagnosed with cancer a few short months ago.

We watched helplessly as the disease and the chemotherapy ravaged her from within. We watched helplessly as she fought on, brave as a trooper, never letting the pain defeat her. And finally her suffering stopped. But not the suffering of those of us left behind who called her soul mate, sister, friend, daughter, mother.

Today I came into consciousness from sleep feeling ill. I had the sort of nauseous realisation you have when you remember who you are, and that things are not well in your world, and you suddenly grasp that someone you have loved forever has died. I wanted to curl up in a ball and vanish.

Instead, here is my mother, drawn, exhausted from crying, sitting on my bed talking about hair colour and ageing and how we can make ourselves look younger without having to go to the hairdressers every three weeks.

It's not something new, this focus on matters mundane. Yesterday, at the funeral, standing by the grave in the rain, I was grieving so deeply I had to lift my shawl over my face to muffle the terrible cries that were welling up. Standing with my face covered, eyes to the ground, I suddenly found myself staring at people's shoes.

"Hey, everyone is in gumboots," I heard my mind saying. "They have heels. I never knew you could get gumboots with heels. Maybe they're some trendy fashion shoe," I pondered before my surrounds came back into focus with a horrible jolt. Beside me I could hear someone whispering about food.

It was like that in the hospital, too. While my cousin lay with eyes closed, I imagined her trying to get in contact with her ancestors, talk to God, work out where she was going, and prepare to leave the precious child she loved so deeply.

"Where d'ya get cars for under \$10,000?" came a shrieking voice from a radio across the room. News, weather updates and bad songs came blaring out, cutting the air between sorrow and reverence.

Next to her, an old woman was nattering to her daughter about the food being a bit soggy and her bowel movements being clogged, as nurses came and went, prodding my cousin, taking her temperature and busily filling in charts.

I wanted to tell my cousin beautiful things, to speak to her about love and her courage and how much she meant to me. Yet in this most secular of spaces I found myself trembling in shock, not knowing how to reconcile the depth of what I needed to say with the fact that the real world was continuing so brutally around us.

It does in the most sacred of places. Even in Varanasi in India, as the bodies are prepared on the banks of the Ganges for their final journeys, placed on funeral pyres to be set alight, grieving family members can be heard crying, singing, but also nattering, chattering and probably gossiping about Auntie Shakti's sari.

"Mum," I say gently, taking her hand. "How are you feeling?" Our eyes fill with tears. "My heart is broken," she says, scouring my face for the meaning of it all.

"Your hair looks great," I say, breaking the painful silence. "Darker is better."
"Yes," she smiles, getting up and looking chuffed. Because we are human. Our minds can't digest too much reality. Mortality, fear of losing those we love, pain, is not something we can focus on for too long.

And life goes on anyway, the cooking, the feeding, the phone ringing with people needing, wanting, bombarding us. And maybe that's the point. Death is not the dramatic four-part symphony I had always believed. It is simply another part of day-to-day life. Another event slotted between bath-time and mealtime and paying bills and choosing the right funeral shoes, which we all have to face.

And somehow, there is something oddly comforting in that cold, hard fact.

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