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Sea Change

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I'm not sure when it happened, only realizing this morning that it had. My husband loves to talk on the phone, and I enjoy listening in on his conversations. Countless Sunday mornings I've fixed breakfast and listened in as he spoke with Maurie—fascinated by my father-in-law's interest in the minute details of Larry's life. The intensity went beyond caring concern. Sometimes it seemed that he lived vicariously through his son, sometimes that he wanted to control Larry's life, and always that Maurie was there to help navigate the tight spots.

Once we had children I understood. I agreed with a friend of mine, who said of her rambunctious toddlers, "They don't get that those bodies they bounce around so carelessly are *mine*." Their bodies and their lives are mine in a deep inescapable way. Of course they leave home and my control erodes. But the fascination remains. I troll our phone conversations long after they end for clues as to how and why they are doing. This is an essential, if sometimes painful aspect of parental love.

In cancer's long killing process we lose something with each breath. But this loss deserves acknowledgement. It is in some way essential. This morning Larry's father chose not to talk to him. Glad to know he called, but unable to bring his swollen brain to utter sentences, he left the phone to "go sit down." My heart broke as I realized the tide had turned. As long as I had known him I'd been able to hold Maurie's interest by talking about his son. The magic of Larry's name never failed to sustain a conversation. During Maurie's illness the mention of Larry brought a moment of focused attention, sometimes more. But that ended a while ago.

That precious interest drifted away. Now I eavesdrop as Larry talks to the hospice nurse about his father—"Is he better? What happened today? That's

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good.” Or, “That’s not so good.” He knows when Maurie went to the bathroom, when he had a bath, how he slept, what pills he is taking, what pills he’s forgetting.

I understand parental fascination with our children, but what makes a middle-aged man so fascinated with his dying parent? Is it loving concern? Or another case of vicarious living? Do we see ourselves in our parents’ last days? Does it tap into our fear of dying? Or are we children again, watching the last promise of safety slip away?

In July, 2007 my family spent a lot of time on the phone. Our son was in Valparaiso, Chile while Larry, our daughter, and I were in Dunedin, New Zealand. Maurie was dying of cancer in Oakland, California. I wrote this essay on a sleepless night a few days before Larry flew back to the states to resume his place at his father’s bedside.