

In Death Watch for Stranger, Becoming a Friend to the End

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Published: January 25, 2004

That first day, Bill Keating hoped that Lew Grossman was not a weeper. Anything else he thought he could handle, but, please, not someone who cried.

In a nursing home bed, still as stone, Mr. Grossman looked awful. A bedraggled, brittle-looking man, 77, he was able to move only his left arm. He had a large nose and protruding ears. He had sunken jowls, and all but five teeth were gone, victims of too much affection for sweets. Wispy white hair erupted from his head.

The doctors didn't imagine he had much longer. Too many things wrong.

An odd time to meet someone, when that person's life is about gone. That was the point. It was supposed to be handshakes on death's doorstep.

Lew Grossman lived at the Isabella Geriatric Center, a sprawling, well-tended nursing home on Audubon Avenue in Washington Heights. For the most part, his days were spent cloistered in his room. No friends, no visitors. His companions were the TV and his memories. The TV was always tuned to Channel 7. He was a stickler about that. "They've got good stuff on Channel 7," was his explanation. In the next bed was a roommate who nodded and smiled but never spoke, not one word.

In May 2002, when they met, Bill Keating didn't know a thing about Lew Grossman. Mr. Keating was no social worker or minister or anything like that. He was a retired corporate lawyer in his mid-60's, recruited into a new program that paired volunteers somewhat enlightened in the particulars of death (they were called "doulas") with terminally ill people alone with their mortality. After all, there's no rental agency for friends, for when you're sick and staring death in the face.

Bill Keating belonged to the program's first full crop of volunteers, nine strong, and the entire enterprise was still feeling its way. So was Mr. Keating.

Before it was over, something rare would happen in this room, but not what either man imagined. Right now, Mr. Keating hunted for hints. He looked at the diminished man curled in the bed and he thought, well, at least he didn't seem to be in pain. No tears. This could work. Bill Keating resolved to go forward and see what it was like being Lew Grossman's last friend on earth.

Doula? Until two years ago, Mr. Keating had never heard the word. A friend told him about **the doula program**, and then at a dinner party late in 2001 he encountered Phyllis Farley, whom he knew.

Ms. Farley, now 79, is a proponent of natural childbirth and chairwoman of the board of the Maternity Center Association in Manhattan. Being around hospitals a lot, she was disturbed to see how many people died alone, with no one to nurture them through their final days.

In 1998, while at a conference dealing with end-of-life issues, Ms. Farley listened to a talk by Dr. Sherwin Nuland, a professor of surgery and an author. He stressed how important it was for sick people to have

companionship to help them accept death, and he used the Yiddish word for funeral, "levaya," which means "to accompany."

It all coalesced in Ms. Farley's head. She decided to start a program to train volunteers to befriend those fated to die in solitude.

She found sponsorship from the Shira Ruskay Center of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, a private New York mental health and social service agency, and N.Y.U. Medical Center. In late 2000, she got a pilot program percolating that paired five volunteers and the dying.

She liked the name "doula," a Greek word for women who assisted mothers with childbirth. The idea zigzagged across her mind that there should be doulas to help people leave the world. The program was named "Doula to Accompany and Comfort."

They found volunteers where they could, some at dinner parties. Ms. Farley sized up Mr. Keating, pegged him as promising doula material. He mulled this over; it sounded worthy, sure, but pretty downbeat. Not that he was squeamish about illness — his father had been a doctor — but he was still early in the beguilement of his retirement and wondered how sitting death watch would mix with bridge and opera.

Then again, he had been given much. He was prosperous, happy, healthy. This was a way to give back. As he would sum it up: "There's a certain satisfaction in doing something that no one else wants to do."

Instructions on Death

The eight training sessions were held in the evenings, in early 2002. The first session put it right out there. Harriet Feiner, the program's director and the instructor, asked, "What word or words come to mind when you hear about death or contemplate your own death?"

What ran through Mr. Keating's mind was: "It's inevitable. We're all going to die and hopefully we're ready for it when it comes. It's a fact of life."

He wasn't into deep philosophical thought. Death was death. Then 66, he had had more than enough of its bitter taste — his entire family was gone. Both parents were dead, and his two brothers had died young, one at 15 of polio, his last days encased in an iron lung, and the other one at 17. He had been going to football camp, but missed the bus and hitchhiked a ride in a truck that turned over.

The flavor of the classes was clinical as well as mystical. It got to be heavy going. Quotations were thrown out.

From Genesis: "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a partner."

From Beckett's "Waiting for Godot": "Don't talk to me. Don't speak to me. Stay with me."

There was more: instruction on hope in the face of death, the intricacies of health care proxies and do-not-resuscitate orders, spirituality and death, how to be a compassionate companion.

Some fairly graphic clinical material was discussed on things that might happen to a person at the very end — disorientation, incontinence, gurgling sounds from the chest, discolored extremities, an odor from the body.

Once they went into the field, the students were told, some cases might consume a few weeks, others several months. (One case would in fact end after three days.) Death tolled when it pleased. In the ideal

execution of their assignment, the volunteers would be sitting there, holding the person's hand, when they breathed their last breath. (That would happen only once.)

When the classes started, there were a dozen people. Nine stayed to the end. Dropouts were expected. No mistaking, it was a dark mission.

Bill Keating stayed. In April 2002, a graduated doula, he was ready for an actual human being. The students were asked if they had preferences — someone old, someone young, did any type of disease bother them? Mr. Keating didn't care. "They're dying," he said. "What difference did it make?"

A Spanish speaker came up. Mr. Keating didn't speak it. The next name was Lewis Grossman? And so life went visiting death.

A Cautious Beginning

From the start, he picked the late morning, around the lunch hour. He began with two visits a week, an hour or so each time. Enough time to have a presence, get a bead on the man, but not too consuming.

They were awkward with each other. Lew Grossman was remote. He didn't give much, opened no doors into his world.

Mr. Keating, after all, had materialized out of nowhere. Mr. Grossman wasn't told the actual reason Mr. Keating was there. He knew him as a volunteer who visited residents. The doulas were cautioned to be circumspect about defining their function, not to blurt out that they were there to watch death. Many people were in denial about their impending fate. They would take the comfort, but hold the facts.

In the sterile room, Mr. Keating could see the man's life moved slowly — lying supine, mesmerized by Channel 7. He was a big fan of "Jeopardy" and "Wheel of Fortune." He kept an eye on Regis, Oprah, "All My Children."

Mr. Keating knew the outline of Lew Grossman's complicated symptomatology but nothing more. He had a weak heart that had been outfitted with a pacemaker, he had ulcers, he had developed bleeding into his spine that left him paralyzed below the waist, and he was mightily depressed. His doctor said he had what is sometimes called the frailty syndrome: in all senses, his body was breaking down.

But Mr. Keating didn't know any of the backstory — how he had made a living, relationships, children, his likes and dislikes. He was a man in a bed and he was alone.

Mr. Keating hunted for a thread of conversation.

"How's the food?" he said.

"Awful," he said.

In fact, in recent months, sulky, he had barely been eating. His lean frame had become a stalk. The less he ate, the more death licked its chops.

"Is there anything you'd like?" Mr. Keating asked.

"How about a lox and cream cheese sandwich?"

Being short on teeth, Mr. Grossman might find the prospect of chewing that a challenge. Mr. Keating decided to improvise. For the next visit, he got the softest bread he could find, without crust, and chopped the lox up so finely it was nearly invisible. Mr. Grossman loved it.

Bingo.

Additional food items got mentioned. He sure would like some matzo ball soup. And olives, pickles, Hershey bars, chocolate milk, steak tartare, all of them his favorites.

The steak tartare was tricky. Mr. Keating imagined a nightmarish result. He'd bring along steak tartare, and in the hour or so it took him to get to the home, the meat would spoil. The steak would poison Mr. Grossman.

So he cooked the steak a bit on his stove. Mr. Grossman didn't notice. He wanted more.

Through pickles and matzo ball soup, the dynamics of the relationship improved.

Mr. Keating saw he needed to genuinely enter Mr. Grossman's world if he was going to reach him. On evenings before he visited, he would click on "Jeopardy" and "Wheel of Fortune," programs he had never bothered with, not quite his thing. But now he was able to see Mr. Grossman and talk on his terms about what he liked: "Hey, did you get that Final Jeopardy question?" "Wasn't that guy behaving bizarre on Wheel?" They became friends in this way, chance cohorts. Mr. Keating would leave and think to himself, "I kind of like the fella."

A Paper Clip and Booze

On the wall of his room, Lew Grossman kept a snapshot of him and another man, seated on a bench, and it was about the only possession that seemed to matter to him.

Now that Bill Keating was showing up regularly, the two getting along nicely, Mr. Grossman found his appetite returning, and he put on sorely needed weight. He got more animated, laughter in his eyes. The days mattered again. Someone cared about him.

And so in dribs and drabs, the meaning of the picture, the full story of who he was, emerged. He had a haunted life — untasted desires and little luck. All lives contain small events with big effects. With Lew Grossman, maybe destiny was ordained by a paper clip.

His father, Edward Grossman, had taken over his own father's ladies' suit and coat business, I. Grossman & Son, and the family lived a comfortable life on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. His father had a giant ego and was a sharp dresser and generous spender. There was an older sister, Edith.

It happened when Mr. Grossman was about 2. He swallowed a paper clip and he was gagging and the nanny who cared for him fished it out with her hand. But later on he seemed a bit slow, inept at socializing, stubborn. His parents seemed to think maybe it was the paper clip, his brain temporarily deprived of oxygen, something no longer working right, but no one knew for sure.

Mr. Grossman went to a private boarding school, but was a poor student. After high school, he joined the Army but was discharged after three months, a nervous condition being mentioned. He worked for his father for several stormy years. He adored his mother, but often clashed with his father, who was disappointed in how he turned out. Mr. Grossman started drinking. He had two quick marriages, one that ended in an annulment and the second in divorce, to a woman who had been in and out of mental hospitals.

Yet he was blessed with a mellifluous voice, and this became his passion. He got gigs at bars and cafes around town, singing popular tunes and old standards, a lot of "Stardust." Never was the pay enough, never did he quite click, and who could know what vagaries were involved: was it the booze or maybe the paper clip?

During the day he operated an elevator at Korvettes in Midtown, the now-defunct discount retailer. He invented songs about the merchandise that lay beyond the doors, entertaining the crowd with his ditties about lingerie and toys and records. When Korvettes closed, he worked as a security guard at a building on 106th Street.

He would say, "Most of my life I didn't feel well."

He drank — beer, vodka, rye — and he gambled, escapes from the snarl of his life. Of the drinking, he gave the usual refrain: "I thought it would solve all problems." One day, when he was about 40, he met a man, Roy Allshause, a security guard, at a bingo game. They fell into a romantic relationship, moving in together in an apartment a few blocks from the Isabella Geriatric Center. He drank heavily too, and he gambled, they played the horses together and tested their luck at the casinos in Atlantic City, and it was rarely good luck.

In a life of blighted promise, this relationship meant everything to Lew Grossman.

I. Grossman & Son went out of business. In time, Mr. Grossman's parents died. His father died last, in a nursing home, basically penniless. Mr. Grossman's sister, Edith, lived with her husband, Joe Weisel, in Rego Park, Queens, but they weren't close and rarely saw each other.

Mr. Grossman's own health worsened, he had some heart valves replaced, and he joined A.A. and quit drinking. When Mr. Allshause was done in by his own drinking and died a few years ago, Mr. Grossman felt part of a fallen world.

"Roy's death is something I never got over," he said. "It seemed like nothing worked out right in my life." At the nursing home, among his few things, he kept that photograph of him and Mr. Allshause sitting on the bench where he could always see it.

An attendant who cared for Mr. Allshause before he died remained to look after Mr. Grossman.

Then the attendant died, more doom in his life.

Soon Mr. Grossman found himself in the hospital, then in Isabella, lying in bed talking to a retired corporate lawyer, the only man, it would seem, interested in talking to him.

Toting Up the Ledgers of a Life

He found him doing what he did — caught up in the soaps, love and betrayal.

Eyeing Mr. Keating, Mr. Grossman snapped alert, and they quickly fell into the usual banter. But there was weight on Lew Grossman's mind, a search for the most basic of truths — virtue, sin, eternal rewards.

Mainly, the drinking. There was angst there.

"You know, I drank." That was how he introduced the subject.

It was after a couple of months when he brought it up. "The biggest mistake I ever made was picking up a drink," he said.

He was something of a religious man, mortality putting God on his tongue, having converted from the Jewish faith to the Baptist (he had liked to sing in the Baptist choir at the nearby Wadsworth Avenue Baptist Church), and he was doing some toting up of the ledgers of his life. When he got to the drinking, that stopped him. This was hard ground to visit.

It had been more than 10 years since he had kicked the habit with help from A.A., had even gotten a pin for staying sober for a decade.

Mr. Keating understood where this was going. Mr. Grossman welcomed an opinion on just how bad a blemish was on his record. He was thinking about the afterlife, about uniting with Roy Allshause, and he was fearful that his whiskey-soaked past was a sure ticket to hell.

Mr. Keating disputed the view. Alcoholism isn't a sin, he told him. It's a disease. "It's nothing to be ashamed of," he said. The fact that Mr. Grossman had fought it and conquered it reflected favorably on him. He told him, "You're going to be on the escalator right up to heaven."

He was looking for absolution. Mr. Keating gave him what he could.

He went on taking stock. "I got a lot of help from A.A.," Mr. Grossman said. "A lot of help. That was the hardest thing I ever did in my life — putting down the drink."

Mr. Keating said, "Yes, and you're to be commended for being able to do it. You've got to be proud of yourself. Not everyone could do it."

"Yeah, like my father. He'd go into a restaurant and shout for everyone to hear, 'Don't give Lew anything for dessert with alcohol in it. He can't drink.' "

"I'll bet you wanted to hit him over the head with a pot."

Mr. Grossman laughed and bit into an Almond Joy, and drank some chocolate milk. They went on to lighter subjects.

It got like that some visits.

A Friendly Medicine Withdrawn

Mr. Keating thought he had fouled it all up. He went to Europe for three weeks in January 2003. When he got back, Mr. Grossman was barely hanging on.

In Mr. Keating's absence, he had stopped eating, then contracted pneumonia and wound up in the hospital. Mr. Keating was racked with guilt. He could see now how his presence had itself become Mr. Grossman's medication, and here he had withdrawn it for three weeks. Now the doctors had raised the prospect of implanting a feeding tube in Mr. Grossman's stomach. He discussed it with Mr. Keating. The shape he was in, he worried that he might not survive the operation.

Mr. Keating told him, "Lew, it's simple the decision you have to make. You're not eating. You know what will happen if you have no nourishment? You'll die."

That got his attention. "I don't want to die," Mr. Grossman said.

In the weeks after he got the tube, he bounced back. The visits returned to normal, flavored with sweets. Cheesecake, peanut butter crackers, banana cream pie.

It was like that the next week, and the week after that, and the month after that and the month after that.

March 6 was Lew Grossman's birthday, and Mr. Keating arrived — surprise, surprise — with a tiny chocolate cake. One look at it and Mr. Grossman brightened.

Mr. Keating said, "So do you feel older today?"

"A little bit," Mr. Grossman said.

"Well, you're a tough old bird," Mr. Keating said.

"Do I look my age?"

"No."

"Seventy-eight."

"You don't look it."

For all their time together, Mr. Grossman never showed much curiosity about Mr. Keating's life. They were two men, but canyons apart in where they had been and where they now were. Mr. Keating was gabby, cheerful, with a soft smile and a bristling abundance of energy. In the course of his visits, he volunteered about how he had grown up in Greenwich Village, that he had never married, that he was a lawyer, having for years been the general counsel of Interpublic, the big holding company of advertising agencies, before retiring four years ago, that he lived on East 57th Street, that he had a small weekend house in Southampton.

He had enjoyed a career of assertive success, no regrets. Filling up his retirement years had been easy. He was constantly sampling concerts, plays, the opera, museums, dinner parties. He traveled the world. He was fit. He had a lot of friends, served on the board of Goodwill. He played bridge every Wednesday morning. He took courses in French, computers, Greek classical literature, Eastern European history.

And then Lew Grossman. In fact, he occasionally told his friends about visiting the lonely man, not much more than that, and most thought, O.K., that sounded a little grim, not for them.

From the lens of Mr. Keating's busy life, Mr. Grossman's hermetic days could seem too dim to bear. "If I lived that life, I'd shoot myself," Mr. Keating said one day.

But the answer to what life is worth living lies in context, seeing existence through the lens of a dying person, and who could do that? "There's a point where you might think it would be better if the Lord took him," Mr. Keating said. "But he's not complaining. He's not suffering. I realize he's perfectly happy."

Mr. Grossman said now, "You know, Bill, when I was in the choir, I had a friend who sang in it but he could never remember the words. So he would write them out and tape them to the person who stood in front of him."

"That's funny."

"I've got a request for you."

"What's that?"

"Doughnuts."

"O.K., I'll bring you some Monday."

"I like jelly doughnuts the best. I haven't had a doughnut in two years."

"Well, we'll fix that. Did you watch Regis this morning?"

"Yeah, he was great."

Mr. Keating tidied up. He threw away a miniature Christmas tree in a pot, now thoroughly expired, that he had brought Mr. Grossman on Christmas Day.

Mr. Grossman said, "Years ago, when I was little, we'd have a Christmas tree every year and I would play the piano and we'd sing all the songs. Christmas was very wonderful. We had a Jewish ornament on the top of the tree."

Mr. Keating said, "A Star of David on top; That's a nice compromise."

Mr. Grossman sneaked a look at the television, a bad car crash on the afternoon news, and said, "It's good to have a friend when you're old and sick."

Lunch arrived — hamburger and fries. With the feeding tube, he would eat some solid foods, but not much. Yet he would always eat Mr. Keating's treats.

Mr. Keating cut him a slice of chocolate cake and fed it to him.

"Oh, man, that's rich," Mr. Grossman said. "It's wonderful."

He looked at Mr. Keating and said, "I'm going to write a book and a movie and call them, 'I Gave My Teeth to the Dentist.'"

Mr. Keating chuckled.

"You know you bring me something good to eat every time," Mr. Grossman said.

Mr. Keating said: "And I tell you off when you misbehave. We're good friends. I've been lucky to find you."

A commercial for the circus came onto the television. Mr. Grossman watched it with fixity. He said, "Unless they have the circus in heaven, I'm not going to be going again."

"Oh, don't say that," Mr. Keating said.

Morning had bled into afternoon, and he got ready to go.

"I'll have a doughnut for you next time," he said.

"I'll be here," Mr. Grossman said, adding with a wry look, "I won't be dancing."

So Bill Keating had come to this unusual project to watch Lew Grossman die. But he no longer dwelled on that. Now, most of all, he wanted Lew Grossman to live.

The Importance of Being There

"Why don't we go around the room and everyone can say a little about their case," Maxine Skurka said.

With that preamble, doleful accounts of impending death invaded the tiny room.

It was Tuesday evening. Every six weeks, the doulas were invited to meet with the facilitators in a scruffy room on Seventh Avenue and let everyone know how things were going in their respective vigils. At this point, late last winter, there were 32 active doulas. Nine had showed up this time. Maxine Skurka, the coordinator of the program, ran the meeting, assisted by Harriet Feiner.

A woman spoke about how her "client" was a 36-year-old woman connected to machines who couldn't see or talk. "There was not much I could do for her, so I sat there with her," she said. "She died."

Ms. Feiner said: "You were there. Simply being there was something."

A woman told about her patient, a woman of 59 with Lou Gehrig's disease: "She was in Israel last September on a trip and she is now immobilized and can barely speak."

She was going fast; much of the time she communicated only by writing. "I must say, it's taking an emotional toll on me," the woman said.

Ms. Feiner said: "What has it done for you? What will it do to you when she does die?"

"I think of that every second," the woman said. "She's such a wonderful person. The other day, she asked me if I could write her obituary for her. I needed a strong martini last night. And I had one."

When his turn came, Mr. Keating related his marathon, now nearly yearlong experience with Lew Grossman.

"He's a very sweet man," he said. "They thought he was going to die very soon. But he hasn't. He almost went in January but he came back."

He said, "We haven't had any discussions about death, but just the other day he did ask about who to tell about cremation."

Ms. Feiner said, "How will you feel when he dies?" She knew that when you became a doula, the work touched the soul, the expiring life becoming entwined with yours. And there was certainty in her mind that the only reason Lew Grossman was still alive was because of Bill Keating.

He said, "Well, obviously we've grown attached. But I'll be professional about it."

"Do you think he wants to talk about dying?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "He has resisted it. At some point, maybe yes. He has talked about being a recovering alcoholic. He's bothered that his past life will not get him points in the next life. I told him that's not sending you down, that's sending you up."

"Would you be prepared to talk more about death with him?"

"Oh sure."

'Moonlight Serenade'

More often now, it was music that bound them. Some jazz and big band music, songs Lew Grossman once sang.

There was a portable tape player in the room, and one morning Mr. Keating turned it on, found a Duke Ellington tape and put it in. Mr. Grossman said he wished he could hear Glenn Miller, and so Mr. Keating bought him a Glenn Miller CD. Thus a new ritual was injected into their days together. Each visit would end with a fresh request, fulfilled on the subsequent visit.

Tommy Dorsey.

Benny Goodman.

Frank Sinatra.

Artie Shaw.

It was nice like this. They would turn down the volume of the TV, snubbing the conspiring soap opera characters, and share the music.

Mr. Grossman was extraordinary in his recollection of songs and singers, and he would spill out his knowledge in an exuberant display. Mr. Keating enjoyed testing him: "What song is this?"

"Sunrise Serenade. That's Glenn Miller's theme song. He had a great saxophone player."

"And this?"

"String of Pearls."

"And?"

"Moonlight Serenade."

Couldn't stump him.

Mr. Grossman dug into a glazed doughnut.

Between bites, he offered: "Who invented doughnuts?"

"I don't know," Mr. Keating said.

"A nut with some dough," Mr. Grossman said.

Bill Keating laughed: "I've never heard that one."

Mr. Grossman belched.

"The tea is very good, Mrs. Astor," Mr. Keating said.

Mr Grossman looked at him puzzled.

"My grandmother used to say that whenever someone belched," Mr. Keating said. "I have no idea where that comes from."

"I used to drink Belch's Grape Juice," Mr. Grossman said.

"Oh, really," Mr. Keating said.

Before long, late in the summer, Mr. Grossman's system couldn't handle the sweets anymore and he stopped pining for them. Sometimes the TV wasn't on. Often a few words. Then sleep, sleep. In point of fact, he was fading. When Mr. Grossman was doing well, Mr. Keating would visit once a week, but when Mr. Grossman took a bad turn, Mr. Keating would come more often. He began showing up three times a week.

There was less conversation. But the music, he still relished the music. Between albums, Mr. Keating would read him the liner notes, bring back the lives of the singers and band leaders.

Mr. Keating clapped his shoulder and got ready to go.

Mr. Keating: "What would you like next time, Lew?"

"How about Harry James?"

"Harry James it is. I'll see you on Tuesday."

Mr. Grossman said, "I'll be here. I won't be dancing."

Sneaking Up on the Subject

The way the conversation went with Maxine Skurka, Bill Keating checking in with her, he told her that Lew Grossman was failing; you could see it in his languid, mirthless state. She asked if he had discussed death yet. No, not really.

Mr. Keating wasn't going to bring it up himself, it gave him a funny feeling. Ms. Skurka suggested something. The training urges doulas to speak to their patients about how they would like to be remembered, what they would like their legacy to be, a way to sort of sneak up on the subject of death.

When he walked in on him in early December, he put on some Glenn Miller and then he bent over and said to Mr. Grossman, "Lew, when you're up in heaven with your friend, Roy, and you will be in heaven, you've been in purgatory down here, how would you like to be remembered? I'm a lawyer and I can do anything you need to have done. But tell me, how do you want to be remembered?"

Mr. Grossman looked up at Mr. Keating and whispered, "I want to be remembered." He tried to stop himself from crying.

"You will be remembered," said Mr. Keating, his eyes damp too. "I will always remember you. People ask me about you all the time. And I say, You're a fabulous person. Knows more about music than anyone I know. What else should I say?"

"I don't know," Mr. Grossman said.

"Well, I know. I'm lucky to have you as a friend."

"Yes."

"You mean an awful lot to me."

"You mean a lot to me."

"I know I do. Let's listen to Ella Fitzgerald, shall we?"

Exceeding All Expectations

This time, a woman paired with a breast cancer patient began the doula meeting.

Then a report on a 38-year-old man with melanoma.

Death getting around to everyone.

It was nearly Christmas, dark days for the lonely and dying.

One of the doulas had brought home-made cookies.

Next doula. Another patient with Lou Gehrig's disease. Her days were running out. She had just turned 50. The woman badly wanted to complete her thesis and achieve her graduate degree. The woman could barely speak. She had the use of only one finger.

"I can help her but I can't do everything," the doula said. "She has to do a lot of reading. But is she going to hate me if she dies without completing it?"

Phyllis Farley said, "No, she's going to bless you for trying to help."

"I help her smoke," the doula said. "She smokes a handful of cigarettes a day. We go outside."

Since Bill Keating had begun seeing Lew Grossman, entire classes of new doulas had completed their training and been put to work. Another group was about to graduate. Something like 110 patients had been comforted. Some doulas were on their third or fourth assignment. There had been another case that had stretched for a little over a year. But Mr. Keating held the record — a year and eight months, the clock still ticking.

It was his turn to speak.

"Everyone knows my tale," he said. "I was assigned to this man up in Isabella. He's a sweetheart of a man who has everything under the sun wrong with him. I met him a year ago last May. They thought he would be dead in six weeks and he still goes. A week ago I thought it was over. He got an upper respiratory infection. Last time I went up, he wasn't in his room. I thought that was it. He was down in the clinic and when I went there they said he was getting better."

He told about the food he used to bring him and now the big band music.

Ms. Feiner asked: "What has he meant to you?"

Mr. Keating said, "Oh, I'm very fond of him. He's just the sweetest man. And he's obviously very fond of me. He's always asking people on the floor where am I. We're great buddies. I never would have thought it, but we're great buddies."

Gone, Just Like That

The clouds vanished and the sky shone. A little breezy. He went up on Monday, Dec. 29, and Lew Grossman looked about the same, drowsy though. He said the absolute minimum. Bill Keating put on a new CD, Ray Eberle singing with the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

They had previously listened to Bob, Ray's older brother, who sang with the Jimmy Dorsey band, and were going to compare the big band vocalists, rule on who was the superior singer, back-to-back Eberles.

They sat, hushed by the music.

"You know this one, Lew?"

"Moonlight Cocktail."

"You're incredible."

Mr. Grossman had been weary lately, nodding off a lot. Sometimes, he would wake up disoriented, and dreams blurred into real life. One time, he said to Mr. Keating, "Bill, I'm glad you're here. My father is sending someone over to beat me up." Mr. Keating mollified him by telling him, "Don't worry, Lew, I'm a lawyer. If he tries anything, I'll have that guy taken care of. He'll be in big trouble."

When the Ray Eberle CD finished, it was time to vote. Who was the better Eberle?

Mr. Keating voted for Bob. Mr. Grossman voted for Bob. Unanimous.

Mr. Keating told Mr. Grossman that he would be away for two weeks in Europe, Venice and Vienna, but he would stop in Sunday, just before his flight, and visit the day after he returned. Mr. Grossman said fine, and hoped he had a swell trip.

"I'll put on some Harry James, Lew," Mr. Keating said. "And I'll see you Sunday."

Mr. Grossman offered his signature parting words: "I'll be here. I won't be dancing."

The call came four days later, just after 6 in the evening. He had just walked into his apartment. It was the call destined to come, but still what an awful call it was.

Lew Grossman had run a fever, and early that afternoon he had died. It was a clean death, a simple death. He was asleep, took one last breath and no more.

Funny how the end was so long expected, and yet the crude reality left Mr. Keating stunned. Lew gone? Just like that?

The next morning, beneath the awakening sky, he took the subway up to Isabella one final time. The room was silent. It was tough to look at the bed, stripped of its linens and its occupant. Mr. Keating removed the small photograph off the wall of Mr. Grossman and Mr. Allshouse, sitting on a bench. It was the one memento he wanted, the only one he needed.

He told the staff to keep the stereo player and the collection of big band albums for whoever moved into the room.

Outside, the wind was angry. Mr. Keating thought that he should postpone his trip, that there was something more he should be doing. But he could find nothing, and so he got his flight.

As he had requested, Mr. Grossman was cremated. There was no funeral. His sister and brother-in-law were asked if they wanted the ashes, but they said, no, choosing instead for the funeral home to scatter them into New York Harbor, the frigid waters his final resting place.

Lew Grossman had remained on the earth for 78 years, and they weren't often joyful years, but they were a life. Now, as Bill Keating saw it, his unlikely friend was in the hands of the Lord, truly dust to dust, all that, and Mr. Keating could only hope that he was at peace in some ethereal world, reunited with his beloved Roy Allshouse. And if Mr. Keating, with his gifts of pickles and chocolate milk and the music of Tommy Dorsey and Artie Shaw, not to mention the gift of his heart, had somehow smoothed his transition to that world, well that was fine. That was fine.