



*"We must have all confused the gathering storm of illness with the effort of great age: he was determined that day."*

### My father just died

My father just died and no one tried to resuscitate.

You have seen its sort before: the drab-grey unappetising layer-cake of a large ill-kempt hospital. It is just off a bypass yet somehow easily missed, accessed via an afterthought when the new housing went up. It sits surrounded by a bewildering array of car parks with obscure entrances and exits. Only the regulars know how to navigate smoothly as far as the front door.

Only it is not a front door at all, and the Christmas wreath hangs limply over it like an apology.

Everyone here wears masks. As we put them on, my sister comments on how much the country is still in confusion on this.

We clutch a scrap of paper on which is scribbled the address. It is not one we understand. It works in reverse – the detail comes last. We made it to the correct hospital at least, but now we have to find the floor, the ward, the bay.

From the door, the corridor is long and leads to a large lobby filled with lifts. The maintenance budget does not seem to filter down this far. Signs by each lift indicate whether it is working and what it is for, leaving only one available for us and no sign of stairs.

Higher up, we emerge into a similar space but with windows. Beaten-up boxes occupy the corners and linoleum corridors lead away.

He's been moved several times, so we arrive at the bay anxious. And no address ever seems to detail the bed. We wander in and gawp. Among men lying supine with grey hair and the pallor of illness, it takes us a moment, but he is here.

He came in with pneumonia. He wanted to see his GP but got an appointment with the practice paramedic. It was not obvious though: he was offered reassurance in the end. When an ambulance was called later, his oxygen levels were so low its crew scooped and ran.

Remembrance Day was only a couple of days ago. He conducted affairs at the local cenotaph. He was just too young to be drafted into the Second World War and finished his service well before Korea. But

he at least remembered that far back and delivered his speech with aplomb. We must have all confused the gathering storm of illness with the effort of great age: he was determined that day.

He wears a mask and is panting, but still does his crosswords and makes jokes. The multicultural wonder that is NHS staffing buzzes around us efficiently, caringly. Somehow, everything happens though I cannot always spot the threads that connect plans to their effects.

Like a throwback to the time the mayor, a minor royal, or a politician opened this splendid new example of modernity in health care, the consultant comes in with his team. Slim and casual, he is younger than me and earnest. He is trying hard to solve the complex challenge that is my father, with his heart problems, his warfarin, his lungs filled with bloody infection. They all are. But it might not work out. The consultant sits beside him to discuss not resuscitating should it get to that.

It becomes tense, quickly. My father is indignant. *'You do everything you can!'* he lifts his mask and croaks.

The consultant becomes defensive, asserts that the choice is his, offers a second opinion. Thankfully, he agrees to a quiet word before things get out of hand.

My father hears only that hope is being withdrawn and with all his being he is fixed on hope. He always has been.

*'Sign the form,' we say, 'but do not raise it again.'*

Paternalism for my father now, not autonomy.

**Saul Miller,**  
GP, Wooler, Northumberland.

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#### ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

**Saul Miller**  
Glendale Surgery, Cheviot Primary Care Centre,  
Padgepool Place, Northumberland NE71 6BL, UK.  
Email: [saulmiller@me.com](mailto:saulmiller@me.com)  
[@saul\\_miller](https://twitter.com/saul_miller)