

Reading Aloud

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Seth Anderson reads to his mother in a clear but soft tone, simple enough for a son to do when visiting the nursing home. Now, though, not so simple. He sits in a chair near her bedside where she lies still, eyes closed, as if completely focused on his voice. But he does not know if she can hear him. A week ago, she could, before she was transported to this hospital and then entered intensive care.

For so many years of her life, she read the classics, went through her Russian period: *The Brothers Karamazov*, *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, but finally she left literature behind, moved onto mystery and crime fiction—light, if sometimes bloody, entertainment. The novel he reads now is a mystery she has already read but wanted to hear again, the first book in a series about a serial killer who, in glorious, postmodern irony, plays the hero, disciplines himself to kill only those who deserve to die.

He wonders if his mother deserves to die. Probably so. Eight months in the nursing home, years of sickness and constant nausea that finally stole any real

quality of life, stole too her 1953 homecoming-queen beauty, the loss of which allowed her also to leave behind any last residual vanity. If he felt he sometimes had difficulty recognizing her now, perhaps she saw revealed the woman she had always been looking for in the books she read, beauty only a mask of features and skin that covered every trauma and turn a life could take.

He knows this scene he is in—not the one he’s been reading, but the one in which he plays a part, this sitting beside his mother and the pulsing machines that measure life—is a poorly written melodrama. Maybe death is always melodrama, God’s little joke at the end on those discriminating former readers of high-minded literature. Or maybe death always trumps melodrama.

At some point, he discovers he has paused, wonders for how long, and finds his place again, continues reading. The hero is stalking his prey through shadows, though it appears he is not yet ready to strike. Even as Seth follows the story and reads the words, it’s as if his mind splits, and, not for the first time, remembers and can even hear as he reads his mother reading to him as a boy, the two of them on the living room sofa, his body leaned into hers as Huck Finn fakes his death and heads out onto the river. He was probably ten at the time, before her suicide attempts, before the death of his parents’ marriage. His father said she was mentally sick; now he has dementia.

Seth can’t stop his mind. Perhaps *that* is why he keeps reading even when he knows she probably cannot hear him. He wants to focus on more than painful memories that creep over and obscure the good ones, focus on more than the body of his mother struggling next to him.

A nurse enters, checks a few vitals. She is blond and pregnant and doesn’t speak this time, has already made clear it could be another day, maybe two.

He is nine chapters from the end and can’t guess, yet, at what will happen. He turns the page, finds the chapter ends abruptly, reads the last paragraph at the top of the page, then rests his voice as sounds of the machines enlarge in the quiet.

In the last four or five months, he has probably read eight novels to her, found early on that it seemed to calm her, to take her away from the room’s

confines, lift her out of herself, her sickness, in some way carry them both to a separate but familiar and private place. He became that boy at his mother's side, reading to her with an adult voice and an adult understanding but retaining a boyish love and trust and reliance that he doesn't want to let go of now. He feels it still as he begins the next chapter. Maybe *this* is why he continues reading. It keeps alive that boy who could not imagine his mother's death, not then, not in those years.

He cannot guess how many fairy tales, fables, stories, and books she read to him. Maybe her reading aloud to the boy he was helped keep her alive, helped delay the suicide years. He can only guess. He understands this will be the last book he reads to her. And he wonders if he can complete it, this book she's already read, before she dies. It isn't likely. If he doesn't, he will finish it on his own, discover the ending she already knows.

