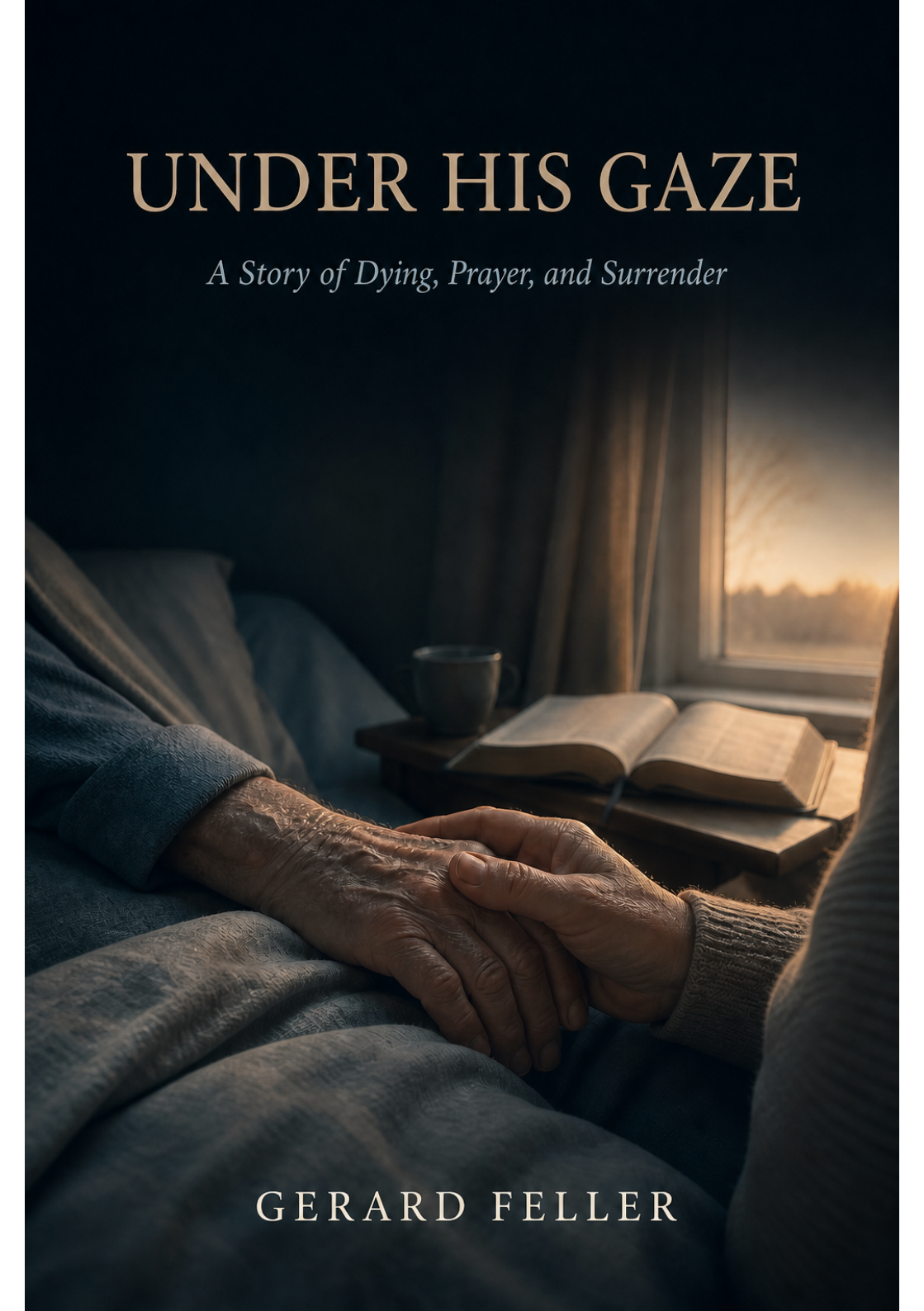


UNDER HIS GAZE

A Story of Dying, Prayer, and Surrender



GERARD FELLER

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Preface

This story is literary in nature. It is thematically inspired by the texts provided on suffering, chronic pain, conscience, care ethics, touch, euthanasia, human weakness and the book of Job. The characters and events are fictional. Medical decisions regarding palliative care and the end of life always require consultation with competent care professionals.

Prologue — The Diagnosis

When Dr Van Meurs said that the cancer had spread, Thomas de Vries looked at her hands. Not at her eyes, not at the screen showing a cross-section of his body, but at her hands. They lay open on the desk, as if they didn't want to hide anything. On her right index finger was a narrow silver ring. Next to her thumb was a ballpoint pen that she no longer touched.

“We can't cure the disease anymore,” she said. “We can still treat. Brake, reduce complaints, save time. But I want to be honest with you.”

Save time. Thomas heard it as if someone had turned on a radio outside the consulting room. He nodded. Anna, his wife, sat next to him and asked about months, chances and a second opinion. Her voice sounded clear, almost businesslike. Thomas admired her for finding words. He himself only had the doctor's hands and the realization that his body, which he had thoughtlessly dressed that morning, had made a secret decision against him.

In the parking garage, Anna stopped between two cars. She hugged her bag to her chest. “Say something.”

“What?”

“What you think.”

He wanted to say that God was faithful. They had sung that hundreds of times. He wanted to say that there was always hope. He had been an elder, praying at hospital bedsides and reminding people with words that transcended the facts. But now those sentences felt like jackets that belonged to someone else.

“I think the parking meter is still running,” he said.

Anna closed her eyes. At first he thought she was angry. Then he saw her mouth tremble. He put a hand on her shoulder, but she didn't move towards him. She stood upright and cried without a sound.

On the way back they drove past the church. The tall windows caught the low afternoon sun. Thomas thought about the previous Sunday's sermon: We are more than conquerors. He had nodded in agreement. Now he wondered whether a man could also be a conqueror if he conquered nothing, if he only became smaller.

At home, Anna made tea. Thomas walked to the shed and didn't turn on the light. Between the workbench and the bicycles it smelled of wood dust and cold iron. He placed his hand on his stomach, where he had felt a nagging pressure for the past few months. He had thought about stress, about getting older, about too much coffee. Now that place had become a map of something that would take him away.

“Lord,” he whispered.

After that, nothing came.

He waited, as if a prayer might continue on its own if he remained silent long enough. But the silence remained silence. For the first time in his life, he was not ashamed that he had no words. He just feared that God didn't have one either.

1 — The House Remains the Same

The first week everything changed and everything stayed exactly the same. The garbage truck came on Tuesday. The boy next door kicked his ball against the fence. In the supermarket the apples were in neat rows. Thomas could hardly understand that no one could see it: hanging above his head was a message that had erased his entire future.

He made lists. Call oncologist. Check insurance. Will search. Write down computer passwords. He ticked boxes with the precision with which he had led construction projects in the past. As long as there were tasks, there didn't have to be an abyss.

Anna joined in. She read patient brochures and noted side effects. Their daughter Sara came over every evening after work and brought soup that no one wanted to eat. Ruben, their son, called from Denmark. He promised to come soon, but Thomas heard from the short silences that his son did not yet know whether he really wanted to accept this message.

In the community, the news spread faster than Thomas expected. Within two days there were flowers on every windowsill. Cards fell through the letterbox with texts about healing, strength and promises. He was grateful and at the same time it made him tired. Every card seemed to tell him something: trust, fight, believe, stay positive.

Only the card from old Mrs. De Jong did not ask anything. It said: Dear Thomas and Anna, I don't know what to say. I call

your names before God every morning. When words fail, I remain silent for a moment.

Thomas put that card on his bedside table.

He received his first chemotherapy treatment in a room where infusion pumps beeped softly. Nurse Miriam did not ask if he was strong. She asked what he was afraid of.

“For pain,” he said first.

She waited.

‘And for dependency. That Anna has to do everything. That people will look at me as if I have already left.’

Miriam nodded. ‘Those are three different fears. We don’t have to solve all three today.’

She explained what to do for nausea, when to call, and why pain wasn’t something he had to heroically endure. Thomas felt his shoulders sag. Her down-to-earthness felt more sacred than the big sentences on some cards.

That evening, Anna prayed out loud. She asked for healing, for wisdom for the doctors and for peace. Thomas lay with his face to the wall. When she said “Amen,” she asked, “Do you want to say anything?”

“No.”

It sounded louder than he intended.

Anna turned off the light. Her hand sought his in the darkness. He let her search until her fingers found his wrist. Only then did he close his hand around hers.

He felt no faith. Well, her skin, warm and vulnerable. Maybe, he thought, comfort doesn’t start with understanding, but with not letting go.

2 — The Language of Victory

Bert came by on Sunday. He wore his best jacket and brought two brothers with him. They pushed the coffee table aside as if to make room for something big.

“We are not going to pray as if the outcome is uncertain,” said Bert. “We take authority.”

Thomas had known him for twenty years. Bert was generous, loyal and tireless when someone had to move. But doubt made him nervous. Sadness even more. He spoke loudly as soon as reality disobeyed.

The three men stood around Thomas. Bert put a hand on his head. Another pressed his hand against Thomas' stomach, right where the tumor was. They ordered the cancer to go away. They talked about unbelief as a blockage and about promises for which God could be addressed. Their voices became warmer and more urgent. Thomas tried to believe. He searched within himself for certainty, but found nausea, shame and the fear that his body would soon become proof of his failing faith.

After the prayer, Bert looked at him expectantly. “What do you feel?”

“Warmth,” said Thomas.

That was true. The hand on his stomach was warm.

‘See!’ Bert smiled broadly. “Hold what you have received. Don't say negative words.”

After they left, Anna put away the coffee cups. She put them in the dishwasher too hard.

“What is it?” Thomas asked.

“I’d like to pray for a miracle,” she said. ‘I want to pray about it every day. But I don’t want you to be guilty if you don’t heal.’

Thomas looked at the spot where Bert had been standing. “Maybe he’s right. Maybe I need more—”

“No.” Anna turned around. “You are not an exam for our faith.”

The words struck him. He got angry because she was protecting him from something he still hoped for. “You’ll give up quickly.”

Anna’s face froze. ‘Do you think I’m giving up? I wake up every morning and have to think again that I could lose you. I read everything, I call everyone, I cook food that you might keep down. But I’m not going to force God to give me a certain answer.’

She walked upstairs. Thomas was left behind, exhausted from a battle that had lasted less than ten minutes.

Later that afternoon, Pastor David called. Thomas gently talked about prayer.

“Can I say something that might not sound pious?” David asked. “Hope is not the same as denial. And belief is not the same as forcing the right outcome.”

“But should we pray small?”

‘No. Ask big. Ask for healing. But let God remain God. Christ prayed for the passing of the cup and at the same time surrendered his will. That is not a lack of faith.’

Thomas was silent.

“And if all you can say today is, ‘I’m scared,’” David continued, “that’s a prayer too.”

That night, Thomas woke up with a cramp in his stomach. He sat down on the edge of the bed. The moon drew a pale plane across the floor.

“I’m scared,” he said.

It wasn’t a victory. But it was true. For the first time since the diagnosis, he felt that he was not speaking to God from a role, but from within himself.

HOPE THAT SUSTAINS

TRIUMPHALISM



Demands a particular outcome



Blames the sick person



Denies fear and grief

COMPASSIONATE HOPE



Asks and listens



Stays when healing does not come



Carries through prayer and practical care

HOPE DOES NOT DENY SUFFERING • HOPE LEAVES NO ONE ALONE



3 — The Second Diagnosis

The scan followed after three courses of chemotherapy. Thomas and Anna sat opposite Dr Van Meurs again. The ring was still on her finger. This time the ballpoint pen lay perpendicular to a stack of forms.

“The treatment does not slow down enough,” she said. “New spots are visible in the liver.”

Thomas heard himself asking about other schedules, experimental drugs, foreign clinics. The doctor answered patiently. There was a second line, but the chance of profit was limited and the burden greater. They didn't have to decide immediately.

In the car, Anna didn't say anything. That made him furious.

“You could have asked something.”

“You asked everything.”

'So you think we should stop.'

“I didn't say that.”

“You thought it.”

Anna looked at him. “I thought I don't want to lose you. And I was like, I don't want your last months to be all hospitals. Those two thoughts don't fit together. I don't know which one to choose.”

At home, Thomas found a message from Bert: Reject this result. Facts are not the last word. He threw his phone on the table. The device slid into a fruit bowl and fell to the ground.

“Facts,” he said. “Everyone talks about facts as if I have to choose which ones are true.”

He walked to the shed and pounded his fist on the workbench. Pain shot through his hand. Once again. On the third blow the skin on his knuckle cracked.

Sara found him there. She didn't tell him to calm down. She grabbed the first aid kit and cleaned his hand.

“I'm so angry,” he said.

“To whom?”

“To God. On my body. To everyone who drives home healthy. To people who say this is a plan.”

Sara wrapped gauze around his hand. “Then you're angry.”

“You don't mind?”

“I think the cancer is bad.”

That's where it broke. Not solemn, not controlled. He cried in short, jerking strokes. He said he might not see her wedding, that he would never hold any grandchildren, that he had promised shelves for her bookcase. Sara sat down on the cold floor and pulled his head against her shoulder.

“Daddy,” she said, “you don't have to comfort me now.”

He thought of Job, who cursed his birthday while his friends searched for explanations. Thomas had previously found that chapter uncomfortable. Now he understood why the Bible had not erased the words. Apparently there was a form of faith that did not speak nicely.

That evening he opened the book of Job. He didn't read past the first complaint. Then he placed his hand on the page.

“You know I hate this,” he said to God. “You know I don't want to die.”

The heavens did not break open. Yet the room felt less closed. As if truth, no matter how raw, had left a door ajar.

4 — What the Body Knows

The pain changed in character. First she had been a pressure, then a stab, now she became a presence that woke before he did. Thomas no longer started the day with coffee but with an inventory: stomach, back, nausea, dizziness, breath.

He was embarrassed by his new attention. Everything revolved around his body. When had he had a bowel movement? How much had he drunk? Which tablet was allowed when? Anna kept a notebook. Thomas mockingly called it 'the chronicles of my decline', until he saw her press her lips together at those words.

The GP referred him to the palliative team. Miriam came home with a doctor and took her time. They talked about pain relief, side effects, anxiety, sleep and what constituted a bearable day for Thomas.

"I want to stay clear," he said. "I don't want to say goodbye in a daze."

"I understand that," said the doctor. 'But clarity and comfort are not enemies that we only weigh against each other once. We continue to adjust. You don't have to see pain as a spiritual assignment.'

Thomas thought of a man from his youth who had wanted to undergo a procedure without anesthesia to prove his trust. The community had talked about him with admiration for years. As if suffering that could be prevented automatically brought us closer to God.

Miriam later helped him shower. The first time he kept his underwear on. She acted as if that was the most normal thing in

the world. When, after a few weeks, he was too weak to stand on his own, he felt shame rise like heat to his face.

“I used to do this myself,” he said.

“I believe that immediately.”

“I think it's terrible.”

“I believe so too.”

She washed his back with slow movements. No haste, no exaggerated softness. Her hands didn't make his body a problem to be solved. They touched him as if he were still Thomas.

Then he sat by the window in a bathrobe. He thought of Jesus washing feet. In the past he had mainly talked about humility on the part of the washer. Now he understood that humility was also needed to be washed.

When Anna came home, he didn't tell her. But that night he said, “I'm afraid you're going to be my only caregiver.”

She turned to him. 'Sometimes I am your caregiver. Sometimes your wife. Sometimes I'm angry with you. Sometimes I just want to lie next to you. It doesn't have to be all at once.'

He ran his thumb over the back of her hand. Her skin had become drier. She also changed under his illness.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

“That I'm leaving.”

'You don't do that to me.'

She placed his hand against her cheek. He felt a tear under his palm. Sometimes the body knew before the words what pity meant: not looking down from above, but standing together under the same weight.

5 — When Conscience Speaks Too Loudly

As Thomas could do less, his past began to take up more space. Silence was not empty; silence had drawers that slid open on their own.

He thought about Ruben. Five years earlier they had gotten into an argument about his departure to Denmark and about the woman he was living with. Thomas had spoken about choices, responsibility, and God's way. Ruben had said that his father always made a judgment before asking a question. Since then they called on birthdays and Christmas, politely and briefly.

Now every unspoken word became an accusation. Thomas lay awake at night and heard his conscience not as a gentle guide, but as a judge who knew no pause. He remembered patients to whom he, as an elder, had mentioned a Bible verse too quickly. A widow to whom he had told that God made no mistakes. A depressed young man for whom he had prayed without asking how things were going.

“Maybe this is punishment,” he said to David.

The pastor sat next to the bed and did not look shocked. “Because you made mistakes?”

‘Because I’ve been hard. Proud.’

‘You are responsible for what you did. But responsibility is different from declaring every illness a verdict.’

“How do you know?”

'I don't know why you have cancer. Anyone who claims that knows more than Job ultimately heard. I do know that Christ offers no half-forgiveness.'

Thomas turned his face away. "That sounds easy."

'Forgiveness is not easy. She cost Him everything. But you are now trying to pay the price again by condemning yourself.'

David was silent for a while. Then he asked, "Is there anything you can still correct?"

Thomas called Ruben that evening. His son didn't answer. He didn't leave a message. The next morning he tried again.

"Dad?"

All prepared sentences disappeared.

"I judged you many times before I understood you," Thomas said. "I called that concern, but it was also fear and pride. I'm sorry.'

There was silence on the other side.

"Are you saying this because you are dying?" Ruben finally asked.

'Yes. And because it's true.'

Ruben exhaled audibly. "I don't know what to do with this."

'That's not necessary now. I wanted to say it without demanding anything in return.'

After the conversation, Thomas felt no peace. He felt exposed. But conscience had changed its tune. It no longer accused him in every direction; it had pointed out one concrete path: confess, ask for forgiveness, let go of what the other person did with it.

Three days later, Ruben sent a message: I'll come next week.

Thomas read it six times. Then he handed the phone to Anna. She sat down next to him and their shoulders touched. They did not pray out loud. Gratitude was too great for one sentence this time.

6 — Job's Friends

The visitors came with love and with baggage. Some brought meals, others brought statements. Thomas learned to feel the difference before anyone had taken off their coat.

A woman from the community said that illness was often caused by unresolved anger. A man knew of a diet that 'the medical world preferred to keep quiet'. Someone asked if Thomas had explored occult ties in his ancestry. They meant well. That's what made it hard to tell how their words wounded him.

Mrs. De Jong came on Thursday. She put a small pot of broth in the refrigerator and sat down. She barely spoke for ten minutes. She didn't look away when Thomas struggled for air.

"Don't you find it uncomfortable?" he asked.

"What?"

"That I have nothing to say."

"I did not come to be entertained."

He smiled.

She read Psalm 13, not the verses that offered immediate relief, but also the question: How long? Then she prayed, "Lord, Thomas is tired. Anna too. We don't understand why this road is like this. Keep them overnight. And if we cannot bear anything, then You bear us."

No order, no explanation, no attempt to make the room spiritually warmer. Her prayer left room for what was really there.

Later that week Bert came again. He had heard that the scan was bad. “You have to be careful what words you let in,” he said. “The enemy wants you to resign.”

Thomas felt fatigue instead of anger. “Bert, I want you to listen to me.”

“Sure, but—”

‘No. Without but.’

Bert was silent.

‘When you tell me to hold on, it feels like you can only tolerate me as long as I heal. As if dying means that we have failed together.’

The color drained from Bert's face. “That's not what I mean.”

‘I know. But that does happen.’

Bert looked at his large hands. For the first time since Thomas knew him, he seemed to have no answer.

“My brother died when I was seventeen,” he finally said. ‘Everyone said we had to accept. I hated that word. I thought: if I just believe harder, this will never happen again.’

Now Thomas did not see the man who had put pressure on him, but the boy who had stood next to a coffin and had sought a method against powerlessness.

“Would you like to do something for me today?” Thomas asked.

Bert nodded.

‘Do not pray that I will be strong. Pray that I am not alone.’

Bert moved his chair closer. His first sentences were awkward. Then his voice broke. He asked God to stay with

Thomas, and to forgive himself where his fear had disguised itself as faith.

It was not a perfect prayer. It was better: it was honest.

7 — Ruben Comes Home

Ruben came on a rainy Tuesday. He stood in the doorway with wet hair and an overnight bag, taller and more tired than Thomas remembered. They hugged each other gently. Thomas felt his son startle at the bones under his sweater.

“You're thin,” said Ruben.

“You are gray.”

“Two hairs.”

“I count at least seven.”

The joke saved them for a few seconds.

The first days they talked about travel, work and practical matters. Ruben repaired a leaking tap. Thomas sat on a chair in the bathroom and gave directions until his son said, “Dad, I live independently. I can turn on a tap.”

“You're using the wrong key.”

“That's possible.”

They laughed, and in that laughter was everything they had missed.

On the third evening, Ruben asked why Thomas had been so fierce at the time.

“I was afraid you would lose God,” Thomas said.

“So you made it hard to stay with you.”

“Yes.”

Ruben looked at the window. “I don't believe like you do anymore.”

Thomas felt the old reflex: organizing arguments, clarifying concepts. He let her pass.

“Tell me how you believe.”

Ruben turned around. “Are you serious?”

“I’m trying.”

His son spoke slowly. About disappointment in the church, about questions that were treated as rebellion, about his longing for something he still called God and his distrust of people who knew exactly what God was thinking. Thomas listened. Sometimes it hurt. Sometimes he recognized himself in the people Ruben described.

“Are you afraid of dying?” Ruben asked later.

“Yes.”

“But you believe in heaven, right?”

“Yes.”

“How can those two be true at the same time?”

Thomas thought about the cards that told him not to be afraid. “Because faith does not make me any other kind of creature. I trust that death is not the end. But I never took my last breath. I have to let you go. My body fights to live. Fear is not always disbelief; sometimes it's love that doesn't want to say goodbye.”

Ruben nodded, as if this answer affected him more than it certainly would have done.

Before going to sleep, Thomas asked if he could pray for him. Ruben hesitated and then agreed.

Thomas did not pray for Ruben's return to a certain form. He thanked him for coming, confessed his own hardness and asked

if God would guide his son, even along paths that Thomas could no longer control.

When he opened his eyes, Ruben wept.

“I forgive you,” he said. “But I’m still angry.”

‘That’s allowed.’

They hugged again, this time without caution. The pain in Thomas’ stomach shot up. He didn’t let go.

8 — The Choice Not to Do Everything

The second treatment made Thomas sicker without noticeably slowing the disease. He lost days to fever, dehydration and a fatigue that did not respond to sleep. After a hospital admission, Dr Van Meurs came and sat next to his bed.

“We can try another drug,” she said. ‘But the chance that you will actually benefit from it is small. The risk of serious side effects is high.’

“If I don't do anything, will I give up?”

“You are not doing nothing. We treat pain, shortness of breath, nausea and restlessness. We continue to care. Only the goal changes.”

Thomas looked at Anna. In her face he saw hope and exhaustion competing against each other.

“I want to go home,” he said.

The decision did not immediately feel like peace. On the way home he wondered if he was a coward. In church he had often heard about fighting to the end. But no one had explained that treatment could also cross a line, that medical ability did not automatically mean that continuing was good.

David came that evening. Thomas told him he was afraid of throwing life away.

“Receiving life as a gift does not mean that you have to use every technical possibility,” said David. ‘You may accept treatment. You may also recognize when the burden is no longer

in proportion to what it can give. Not doing everything is not the same as causing your death.”

“And if the pain becomes unbearable?”

“Then good care must do everything to alleviate it. Mercy does not require you to suffer uselessly.”

They also talked about euthanasia, because Thomas himself mentioned the word. Not as a debate, but as fear. What if he became so dependent that all he wanted to do was disappear? What if Anna couldn't handle it anymore?

“Promise me you'll tell me when you want it to stop,” David said. ‘Not so that anyone will judge you, but so that you are not left alone with that despair. A death wish can also be a cry: see my pain, do not leave me, give me peace.’

Anna took Thomas's hand. “You are not a burden for us to remove.”

“But I am a burden.”

“Sometimes,” she said, to his surprise. ‘And I'm tired and angry sometimes. Love does not mean that there is no burden. Love means that your worth is not determined by that burden.’

That night Thomas wrote in a notebook: I will not stop living. I will stop a treatment that shortens my life without stopping death.

Under that sentence he wrote: My body is not worthless because it fails. It remains the body in which I have loved, worked, sinned, prayed and broken bread.

He put down the pen. Outside it started to rain. The sound against the window was soft and even. For the first time, he did not see the choice as capitulation, but as another form of

responsibility: not ruling over life and death, but honestly receiving what was still given.

9 — Small Days

Time was getting shorter at home. No more months, hardly weeks; good mornings, difficult afternoons, an hour without nausea. Thomas discovered that a day did not have to be long to be full.

Sara took photo albums with her. They laughed about his mustache in 1987 and Anna's enormous glasses. Thomas told the same story with each photo until Sara said, "I know that one now."

"Later you want me to tell him again."

The word later remained between them.

One bright morning, Thomas asked if the window could be opened. The air smelled of wet earth. A blackbird pulled a worm out of the grass. It moved him so much that he turned his face away. He had seen thousands of blackbirds without actually seeing them. Now the ordinary became unbearably expensive.

Not every day was like this. Sometimes his world became narrowed to waiting for the next dose of medication. Pain made him short. When Anna dropped a glass, he shouted that she was never paying attention. She walked out of the kitchen. Thomas heard her crying upstairs.

He wanted to chase her, but his legs wouldn't carry him. He sat among the shards for ten minutes without moving. The humiliation of that was worse than the pain.

When Anna came back, her eyes were red. She wiped up the glass.

"I'm sorry," he said.

“I know.”

“No, not just because I'm sick. I hurt you.”

She sat down across from him. “I want to have space to be angry with you sometimes, Thomas. Otherwise I must become holy before you die, and I cannot do that.”

He laughed hoarsely. “Me neither.”

They agreed that illness explained a lot but did not excuse everything. That Anna was allowed to walk out of the room. That Thomas could ask for forgiveness without demanding that everything immediately feel good. Their love became less graceful and more reliable.

Miriam taught Sara how to help her father turn without pulling on his arm. During the explanation, Sara placed her hand on his shoulder. Thomas closed his eyes. Touch had become a language: I am here, you are still here, your body does not scare me.

That evening they celebrated supper at home. David broke a small loaf of bread over a plate. Thomas could only tolerate a crumb and a drop of wine. Yet he tasted more than bread. He thought of a God who had not kept his distance from flesh, hunger, blood and death.

“The body of Christ,” said David.

Thomas received the piece of bread in his open hand. Not as someone who understood everything, but as someone who needed to be fed.

10 — When Prayer Hurts

There came days when prayer comforted Thomas and days when every prayer irritated him. As soon as someone said, “Lord, we know you have a purpose,” his body tensed. Intention had become a word with which people tried to make sense of the chaos.

A young woman from the congregation prayed at his bedside that this illness would become “a mighty testimony.” Thomas looked at Anna, who lowered her eyes. Afterwards he politely thanked him. As the door closed, he said, “Does even my death have to accomplish anything?”

Anna smoothed his blanket. “I don't need you to be a good story.”

That evening David came back. Thomas asked why some prayers felt like pressure.

“Because a prayer can also talk about someone,” David said. “We can use God to avoid feeling our own fear. Then our words sound pious, but they leave the suffering person alone.”

“How should you pray then?”

‘Listen first. Sometimes we ask: what can I pray for you today? Sometimes just mention your name. And sometimes silent.’

Thomas thought about Gethsemane. To friends who were asked to stay awake and fell asleep. Perhaps the first service of prayer was not finding the right words, but staying awake to the other.

The next afternoon the living room was full of six people from the congregation. Bert had asked if they could come. He said beforehand: “Thomas decides.”

Thomas looked around the circle. “Pray for a miracle if you want one.” I still want to live. But also pray that we can handle the truth. Pray for Anna and the children. And leave room for silence.’

The prayers were short. Mrs. De Jong mentioned his name. Sara asked for courage for the night. Bert didn’t thank God for a victory that no one could see; he asked if God’s presence could be deeper than their powerlessness. Then they were silent.

In that silence, Thomas heard the ticking of the clock, a car passing by, someone turning up his nose. He felt no heat passing through his body. The tumor did not shrink under their hands. Yet something happened: no one pulled him out of his reality. They sat down with him.

Afterwards Bert stayed behind. “I always thought faith meant never expecting a bad outcome,” he said. “Now I think I was mainly afraid to stay there when it came.”

Thomas held out his hand. Bert grabbed her with both hands.

“Then stay,” said Thomas.

“Yes.”

A week later, during a night of distress, Thomas himself could not pray. Anna sat on the edge of the bed and just repeated: “Jesus, have mercy.” Not as a formula, not to force anything, but to the rhythm of his breath. Four words, again and again.

Thomas leaned against her. The prayer did not hurt. It bore the pain without denying it.

11 — The Night of Abandonment

The morphine helped with the sharpest pain, but brought strange dreams. Thomas saw hallways that merged into each other, doors that led nowhere, and his father, dead for twenty years, standing at a station without looking at him. Sometimes he woke up not knowing what year he lived in.

One night the confusion was gone and only fear remained. Anna slept in the chair. Thomas looked up at the pale ceiling and knew with a certainty that felt stronger than faith that there was nothing beyond the visible world. No Father, no homecoming, just the extinguishing of brains that had been telling themselves stories for centuries.

He tried to recite Psalm 23. After “the LORD is my shepherd” he faltered. The verse sounded like a phrase from his childhood, not truth. He thought about all the times he had told others that God was near. What if he had given them a language to cover their fear?

“Anna.”

She woke up with a start. ‘What is? Pain?’

“God is gone.”

She leaned toward him. “What do you mean?”

‘I can't find Him anywhere. I don't believe it anymore.’

He expected her to correct him. Instead, she pulled the chair closer.

“Then I will believe for you tonight,” she said.

“Can you do that?”

‘I don't know. But I'll stay.’

She took his hand and said nothing. Hours later the room turned gray. The fear was not overcome; she had become exhausted. Miriam arrived early and immediately saw that something had happened. She checked his medication and asked if he wanted to tell me.

“I have lost my faith,” Thomas said.

“Tonight?”

“Maybe.”

‘And yet you tell us. Maybe that is also a way to relate to it.’

Thomas looked at her. “Are you religious?”

‘Yes. But at some beds I talk about it a lot and at others I hardly talk about it. It's not about my need to complete something.’

She washed his face. The cool cloth over his forehead brought him back into his body.

Later, David read Psalm 22. Not just the ending, but the forlorn cry at the beginning. Thomas heard that Christ himself had given words to Godforsakenness. This did not diminish the absence he felt. But she was no longer outside the faith. There was a trail running through it that he didn't have to make himself.

“Maybe faith is not that I feel God,” said Thomas, “but that I still express my complaint in his direction.”

David nodded. “And that others carry you when you cannot.”

Thomas closed his eyes. He had always thought that faith was something he possessed. Now it looked more like a house

where others brought him back when he couldn't find his own way.

12 — The Wish for It to End

The hardest day started with vomiting. Then came diarrhea, cramps, and a panic that caught his breath high in his chest. Despite extra medication, it took hours for his body to calm down.

“I can't do this anymore,” he said to Anna. “Please make it stop.”

She froze. “You mean—”

‘I don't know what I mean. I want to leave. I want to sleep and not wake up.’

Anna called Miriam. An hour later the palliative team was at the bedside. No one was shocked by his words and no one acted as if they were unimportant. The doctor asked about the pain, the fear, the medication and what ‘wanting to leave’ meant to him.

“I don't want anyone to kill me,” Thomas finally said. “But I don't want another day like that either.”

“That difference is important,” said the doctor. “And your desperation is important. We are not just going to look at the pain score. We also need to address the unrest and ensure you and your family receive support.”

They adjusted the medication. Miriam arranged night care. David came without a Bible verse and sat at the end of the bed. Anna was allowed to sleep in the room next door.

Thomas felt guilty for saying he wanted to leave. As if he had offended God and rejected his family. David asked, “When you called for it to stop, what did you really want?”

'That someone understood how bad it was.'

'Then it was also a call for closeness.'

"But I wanted to die."

'You didn't want to continue that way anymore. We don't have to make it prettier. And we don't have to judge you for it either.'

In the days that followed, the suffering became more manageable. Not gone, but limited. Thomas noticed how strongly his death wish had been linked to untreated symptoms and the prospect of completely exhausting Anna. When someone sat with him at night and Anna slept for six hours straight, space returned.

He now understood why bedside ethics was something other than a debate. Words like autonomy, dignity, treatment and dying were given the faces of a tired woman, a man who soiled himself and a nurse who changed sheets at three in the morning without disgust.

"My dignity doesn't feel very great," he said to Miriam.

"Dignity is not something you lose when you need help," she replied. 'It is also not dependent on how controlled you remain. We treat you with dignity because you are human.'

Thomas thought about that sentence for a long time. His life was not valuable because he remained useful, bright, or courageous. Just now that all evidence of independence was crumbling, it became visible whether the words he had always believed really held up: created, known, loved.

13 — The Voice from the Storm

Ruben found Thomas one afternoon with the book of Job open. “Are you out?” he asked.

“No.”

“That's a big book for no answer.”

Thomas smiled. “Maybe that's the point.”

They read together the chapters in which God speaks out of the storm. Thomas had previously found these impressive: questions about the earth, the sea, constellations and animals. Now they annoyed him at first. Job had asked for justice and was given a tour of creation.

“He doesn't explain anything,” said Ruben.

“No.”

“Does that help?”

Thomas looked through the window at the clouds piling up over the houses. ‘Maybe God doesn't say: your pain is small. Perhaps He is saying: Your pain is not the entire universe, and you are not alone at the mercy of the chaos you see.’

“That still sounds like a detour.”

“Maybe it is.”

That night a thunderstorm passed over. Ruben and Sara had stayed. The power went out briefly. In the darkness the sky lit up white and a boom followed that shook the window. Thomas lay awake thinking about the voice from the storm.

He received no explanation for the tumor. No secret reason justified the loss. But he felt his questions changing. No longer alone: Why are you doing this? Also: Who are you when I don't understand anything? Who am I when I can't control You?

The next morning he asked if they could move his bed closer to the window. It took a lot of effort. When it was done, he could see a sliver of sky.

"I have often defended God," he said to Ruben. "As if He needed my arguments."

"And now?"

"Now I hope He holds me when I cannot explain Him."

Ruben sat down next to him. "I don't know if I believe that."

"You don't have to say it for me."

"But I hope so."

They watched together as a flock of birds changed directions as if one invisible movement passed through all the bodies at once.

Thomas thought about Job's friends. Perhaps their greatest mistake was not that all their words were untrue, but that they used truth to keep their distance. They wanted to solve the riddle so they wouldn't have to sit next to Job on the ash heap.

Ruben was sitting next to him. He had no answer, hardly any faith, and yet he stayed. Thomas felt that presence could sometimes say more about God than a conclusive statement.

"Read another piece," he asked.

Ruben took the book. His voice was low and uncertain. Outside the sun broke through the clouds. Not as evidence. Just like light.

14 — Everything Still to Be Said

Thomas made a separate appointment with each family member. Not because a leaflet advised it, but because he noticed that joint conversations were easily filled with practical questions.

He talked to Sara about her future. She wanted to postpone her wedding so he could be there.

“No,” said Thomas.

“You don't know when—”

“Exactly. Don't build your life around my death date.”

“But if you're not there?”

He swallowed. “Then that hurts. With you and, if I know anything else about this, also with me. But my love for you is not limited to one day.”

He gave her a letter that she was not allowed to open until her wedding day. Then they cried for a future that would be beautiful and broken at the same time.

He talked to Ruben about tools, the workbench and grandpa's old fountain pen. Then he said, “I have one request.” Don't make my death an argument against God or an argument for God. Just let it be the death of me. Search honestly.”

Ruben nodded. “That's probably the freest thing you've ever said to me.”

The conversation was the most difficult with Anna. They discussed the funeral, songs, names and finances. Thomas did not want people to say that he had “lost the battle.”

“Cancer is not a moral competition,” he said. “And dying is not the same as losing.”

He asked for Psalm 42, even with the thirst and unrest. And about the song they sang on their wedding day, even though he knew Anna might not get through that.

After the papers were put away, she remained seated across from him.

“What will I do without you?” she asked.

Thomas had no answer. He couldn't promise her that God would fill the gap as if he were expendable. He couldn't ask for her to be strong.

“Breathe,” he said. ‘Breathe first. Let people in. Be angry when you are angry. And one day, not for me but for you, I will find something beautiful again without feeling guilty.’

Anna looked at their wedding ring on his thin finger. “I don't want you to let me go.”

‘I don't want it either.’

‘Everyone talks about letting go as if it were a neat thing to do.’

‘Maybe it's more that our hands aren't strong enough in the end.’

She joined him on the bed. He rested his head against her shoulder. They stayed like that until his back hurt and neither of them wanted to move.

Later, Thomas wrote short sentences for people he would no longer speak to. No lessons, no last great truth. Thank you. Forgive me. I have loved you. Take care of Anna. Keep asking questions. Sometimes one sentence was enough to open up an entire life.

When he finished, he felt no completion. There was always more to say. But love didn't have to be fully expressed to actually exist.

15 — The Humiliation of Weakness

One morning Thomas could no longer get out of bed on his own. His legs didn't respond to what he asked of them. Ruben and Miriam lifted him up together. Halfway through he lost urine.

Thomas cursed. The word shot out before he could stop it. Then he covered his face with his hands.

“Leave me alone.”

“We'll clean you first,” Miriam said calmly.

“I said: leave me alone.”

She stopped. “I hear you are ashamed. But you don't have to be alone in this.”

Ruben looked at the ground. Thomas felt pity in the room and hated it. He wanted to be the father who fixed a leak, the elder who carried others, the man who put on his own pants. Now his dignity lay in wet sheets.

Miriam asked Ruben to make some coffee. She worked quickly and carefully. When Thomas was clean, she pulled up the blanket.

“You haven't gotten any worse,” she said.

“It feels that way.”

“Feelings tell the truth about how heavy something is. They don't always tell the truth about who you are.”

That sentence stuck with him. Later he asked Ruben to come back.

“Sorry you had to see that.”

'Dad, I changed a child. Very often.'

'That's different.'

'Why? Because you're my father?'

Thomas nodded.

Ruben sat down on the edge of the bed. “Maybe I can do something for you sometime.”

Thomas looked at his son's hands. The same broad fingers he used to have. He realized that his aversion to dependency wasn't just about privacy. He had confused value with ability. Weakness seemed to him a defect to be hidden, while his faith told of a crucified Lord whose hands were not free to save himself.

That didn't make weakness beautiful. Thomas refused to romance her. Pain remained pain, loss remained loss. But maybe weakness wasn't where humanity ended. Perhaps it was the place where the illusion of a human being carrying himself ended.

That afternoon he asked Ruben to help him drink. His son held the straw. Thomas took three small sips.

“Thank you,” he said.

They were simple words, but they cost him more than many prayers he had said in public.

Later Bert came and asked if he could do something practical. Thomas pointed to the barn. 'The workbench has to go to Ruben. Help him take it apart.'

From his bed he heard the sound of screws, wood and male voices. Part of his life was disassembled and passed on. It hurt. It was good too.

16 — The final boundary of care

The shortness of breath increased. Sometimes Thomas fought for air for minutes and the fear lasted longer than the attack. The palliative team discussed what could happen if complaints became untreatable despite all care.

“Palliative sedation may be an option in the very last phase,” the doctor explained. “The goal then is to lower consciousness to alleviate untreatable suffering, not to end life. But we always look at what is needed and discuss it carefully.”

Thomas listened attentively. “Then I might not be able to talk anymore.”

“That’s right. That is why it is good that you now say what is important to you.”

He looked at Anna. The fear in her eyes was not only that he would suffer, but also that the last conscious moment would pass unnoticed.

“I don’t want you to wait for one perfect parting sentence,” he later told the family. “I’ve already said goodbye. Often.”

Yet they all looked for signs. Every look could be the last clear look. The transition could begin every night.

David talked to Thomas about dying under God’s rule. Not as a slogan with which to conclude medical questions, but as an attitude: not to treat life as a possession that he had unlimited access to, nor as an idol that had to be extended with every possible intervention. Receiving, caring, limiting, giving back.

“I always thought surrender was one big moment,” Thomas said. “But I hand in something different every day.”

‘Maybe the big moment is made up of all the little ones.’

Thomas handed over his car keys. His banking affairs. The key to the shed. The leadership of his family, if he ever really had it. Ultimately, he even relinquished responsibility for his mental condition.

“If I get confused,” he said to David, “and say strange things—”

‘Then that doesn't change who you are in Christ.’

“And if I die afraid?”

‘Then you die as a scared person held by God. You don't have to make your dying a final feat of faith.’

Thomas exhaled slowly. That thought freed him more than the command to be brave. He didn't even have to control his last moment.

They agreed on what medication could be given if necessary. Anna wrote down telephone numbers. Sara laid out clean sheets. Ruben placed a chair on the other side of the bed. Care took the form of preparation, not because they welcomed death, but because love did not look away from what came.

That evening, Thomas prayed, “God, I am not giving you anything that is mine. I acknowledge that I have always been Yours. Teach me that without losing myself.”

17 — Keeping Vigil

In the last week, Thomas hardly ate. His words became shorter. The room took on the rhythm of his breathing and the people coming and going.

Mrs. De Jong sat with him for an hour and knitted without speaking. Bert read softly from the Gospel of John. Miriam checked his mouth, his skin and the medication. No one asked how things went anymore. The demand had become too great.

On Friday evening, Thomas became restless. He pulled the sheet and said he had to go home.

“You're home,” Anna said.

“No, I have to go home.”

She looked at Miriam in alarm.

“This happens often,” he said. ‘Speak calmly. Don't correct too much. Maybe he doesn't mean an address.’

Anna leaned over him. “You can go home, Thomas. We are with you.”

His hand relaxed.

The children took turns sleeping. That night, Sara sat next to him and talked about the bookcase that he had never finished. “Ruben and I do it together,” she said. “Probably crooked.”

Thomas opened his eyes. “Level,” he whispered.

Sara laughed through her tears. “Of course.”

It was unexpectedly clear on Saturday morning. He asked for Anna. She sat close to him.

“Are you there?”

“Yes.”

“I cannot see God.”

“No.”

“But I think He sees me.”

Anna rested her forehead against his. “I think so too.”

David arrived around noon. He anointed Thomas not as if oil were a final technique, but as a sign that this fragile body belonged to God. He read Romans 8: nothing could separate the love of God in Christ. No death, no fear, no confusion, no failing body.

Then he asked, “Thomas, do you want us to pray or be silent?”

“Both.”

They prayed short sentences. There were long silences between sentences. Anna gave thanks for forty-four years together. Sara gave thanks for a father who had learned to say sorry. Ruben said, “God, if You are there as he believes, catch him.” His voice broke on the word catch.

Bert did not pray for healing. He asked for mercy for every breath and for peace that denied nothing.

Thomas listened with his eyes closed. He felt hands: Anna on the left, Ruben on the right, Sara on his foot. The touches didn't stop him. They said he didn't fall out of their love when he got out of their reach.

Towards evening his breathing became shallower. The doctor gave extra medication for shortness of breath. Thomas slept,

woke up briefly, slept again. The vigil continued. No one conquered the night. They remained present in it.

18 — Before the Face of God

Shortly before dawn, Thomas opened his eyes. The room was dark, but there was a narrow gray border running along the curtains. Anna was still sitting next to him. Her hand was in his, although she didn't know if he felt her pressure.

“Anna.”

She immediately leaned towards him. “I'm here.”

“Children?”

Sara and Ruben got up from the chairs where they had been napping. David stood up from the corner of the room. Miriam stayed near the door, close enough to help, far enough to give the family space.

Thomas looked from one face to another. His breath made a soft scraping sound. He tried to say something, but only air came out.

“You don't have to explain anything anymore,” Anna said.

He closed his eyes. Images came into his mind without any order: the parking lot after the results, wood dust in the shed, Sara as a child with broken knees, Ruben at the kitchen table, Anna in her wedding dress. Also faces he had hurt. Prayers that had remained empty. Bread in his open hand. The blackbird in the grass.

He had thought that at the end he should feel perfect confidence. Instead, he felt fear, love, pain, gratitude, and a fatigue deeper than sleep. He no longer put them in order.

“Father,” he whispered at last.

The word was barely audible.

David began to speak the words of Jesus: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Thomas moved his lips along. Not as someone who controlled death, but as someone who finally stopped holding on to himself.

He did not surrender a well-rounded life before God. He gave real life: his love and his hardness, his faith and his doubt, the days when he was brave and the night when he lost God. He surrendered a body that had carried him and now could go no further. He did not give up Anna and the children as if they were no longer any of his business; he entrusted them to hands that must be greater than his.

His breath disappeared for a long time and then returned once more.

Anna felt the small movement of his fingers. Maybe it was a reflex. Maybe an answer. She didn't need to know.

“Go ahead,” she said. “We love you.”

Thomas exhaled.

There was no visible gate, no voice for the others to hear. Only the first light of morning entering the room and falling on his face. His features relaxed. The battle language with which people had surrounded him had become silent. The questions were also not answered. But he was not alone.

Anna held his hand until she went cold.

Epilogue — What Remains

After the funeral, the workbench was in Ruben's garage. Sara's bookcase was indeed a bit crooked, but the top was level. Anna found notes from Thomas for months: a password, a measurement for a shelf, half a shopping list. Ordinary life continued to leave traces of him.

Bert changed his way of praying. When someone was sick, he was no longer the first to ask for a testimony. He asked, "What do you need today?" Sometimes he prayed big for healing. Sometimes he brought soup. Sometimes he would sit next to a bed for an hour without explanation.

Ruben occasionally went to church with Anna. He didn't always sing along. Nobody forced him. One Sunday Psalm 42 was read. When he heard the words about unrest and hope, he thought of his father, not as proof that everything was true, but as someone who had searched until the end.

Anna slowly learned to breathe on her own. Mourning did not come in stages that followed each other politely. She could be grateful, furious, calm, and broken in one morning. She kindly let go of people who wanted to speed her up. She let in people who stayed.

On Thomas' first death anniversary they came together. No solemn meeting; coffee, sandwiches, photos. Sara already read the letter she had received for her wedding day. It read: You don't have to deny my absence to carry my love. Live spaciously. Be gentle with those who are afraid. And when you pray with someone who is suffering, do not try to explain God to him. Stay with him.

Anna looked at the hands around the table. Hands that had cared for, held and released Thomas. She thought about his last morning. She still didn't know what surrender felt like to the one who died. For those who stayed behind, it did not feel like one gesture, but like a daily opening of cramped fingers.

Outside, a blackbird perched in the grass.

No one called it a sign.

They did see him.

DYING COMES IN WAVES



NOT LINEAR • PHASES MAY RETURN AND COEXIST

Afterword — On the Stages of Dying

Thomas' path is not a medical or psychological step-by-step plan. Denial, combativeness, anger, guilt, sadness, negotiation, acceptance and surrender return in the story, but not in a fixed order. They overlap, disappear and return. A dying person can hope for recovery and make preparations for his funeral on the same day. He can believe and feel abandoned. He can be grateful for care and at the same time hate his dependency.

The story therefore distinguishes between hope and triumphalism. Hope dares to ask God for healing and at the same time remains present when healing is not forthcoming. Triumphalism places the responsibility for the desired outcome on the faith of the sick person and can therefore make him mentally lonely. Solid compassion listens, recognizes physical and psychological distress, accepts professional palliative care and prays without denying reality.

The wish for suffering to end also requires closeness and careful assessment, not quick condemnation. Good palliative care focuses on pain, shortness of breath, anxiety, relational distress and spiritual questions. Decisions regarding treatment and end of life should always be discussed with qualified care professionals. This story is not medical advice.

The central line of faith is not that a Christian should die without fear. It is that fear, complaint and weakness do not place a person beyond God's reach. Surrender is not a final achievement, but the letting go of the illusion that we can carry

ourselves. Before God the whole, unfinished life may be restored.