

# The Mercy Machine

By Julie Veinot

Imagine a machine that allows you to die at your leisure - an option allowed to everyone who lives. You get to ensure those you love will be at your deathbed when you decide to push a blue button, followed by a green one.

They are set far apart so you cannot accidentally press both at the same time. It is a machine tastefully called the Mercy Machine by the public, a creation of a woman who spent most of her time in court.

I chose to use the machine three years ago, but did not have reason to use it until this spring.

There are people who say euthanasia is a crime, that we take a life that is not ours to take. Horseshit, I say. We are creatures of free will. We decide to fasten our seatbelts or not. We go to the grocery store and bypass the antioxidant-rich carrots for the carrot cake topped with more icing than one's heart has a right of surviving. We stride into the tobacco shop and buy sticks that cause cancer.

And finally, in the year 2054, we are allowed to apply for the use of a toaster-sized machine. It is smooth, but not silver: blue. There are no signs there is anything in the machine, but I know that when I push the two buttons, an IV piping into my arm will release a toxin that will still my breathing and my heart, all within twenty seconds. To make it easier on our families, we are advised to wear adult diapers, as the unpleasant after-effect (as anyone who has ever put a pet to sleep will testify to) is the loosening of our bowels. Sometimes, I am told, this does not happen, but with wry humour, I am also told I will not know whether or not this occurs. Thank you.

At the office of human vitals, I fork over my ID, sign the paper to pick up the machine from a civil servant who double-checks my fresh signature with the one on my card.

They monitor these things well.

I tell the local authorities of my plans so they know when to check on my house, so they can be certain of finding me before I decompose in my rocking chair.

When you have loved ones who still want to see you, they do this part for you.

Sun slants through my sitting porch's wooden blinds. It pierces through the plants scattered around my chair; many of them are crispy brown, barely alive, much like me. I wonder if one sees plants in heaven. Do they go there when they die? My wife would not want to live in a place where there is no greenery, no African violets - a world, she'd cluck her tongue, that would not be worth living in. I wonder what she will think of me once she discovers I've used the machine.

Cancer will not kill me fast enough. I leave chemotherapy to my younger counterparts; at ninety I have no interest in sustaining a life I wanted to end long before my cells went berserk. I do not want to drag this show on any longer, so I sit, the machine beside me, smack-dab in the

middle of a table littered with pain pills. I look: the machine is plugged in. I imagine if any of the poor souls down at the power company knew what I was going to do in the next hour, they would turn the juice off. Everyone wants to be a hero these days - everyone wants to see you don't use the machine, but it's easy to assume tomorrow's rain will wash the tears from your face when you're thirty, get off work at five, and go home to your wife and kids. Now, when it comes to life or death, well, you wish for death.

Death is a blessing, living beyond your time the curse.

With my tired old hand, I reach forward.

For three years, my wife and I argued. About money, which she spent constantly. They were foolish arguments that never made sense, only Wendy was angry all the time. Then, as if she was sorry for what she said, she would retreat to our bedroom and stay there for hours on-end. I would enter long enough to get clean clothes for the night, shower, and spend the rest of the night in the bedroom that had been our daughter's before she left for college. There I would lay, wondering when I would leave. And divorce. And begin again.

"It's over," I said to Wendy one night, when she was flash-cleaning the house at eleven o'clock.

In surprise, she yanked the vacuum cord from the wall.

"Divorce?"

I nodded. "It's over, Wendy. I can't do this anymore."

Had I known she was sick, I wonder if I would have done such a thing. I had known the doctors diagnosed her with depression - the fashionable mind diagnosis du jour - and they had sent her home with antidepressant after antidepressant. Zoloft. Prozac. Elavil. And more with names I could not pronounce.

She stormed to the bedroom (which had long ceased being mine) and stayed there all night.

I often wondered what would have happened had I gone to the room and knocked on the door - even just to get a paper from my pants' pocket - any excuse to go in the room to see if she was alright. But I did not know she was sick; I did not think she would be anything less than alright.

I just didn't think then. I thought a lot afterwards, though.

A lot.

I press the blue button, only a tremor of fear in my hand.

I'd close my eyes, but this is the last of earth I will see.

At the funeral, my daughter came up to see me. She looked horrible; her black braids were frayed like rope, her eyes plunked deep into dark sockets. But for as frail as she looked, her eyes were fiery. I was afraid for her, afraid she had inherited her mother's illness.

"I hate you," she said, all her anger seething from that hiss. "You