

## Sometimes a curtain

■ Cite as: *CMAJ* 2017 December 11;189:E1532. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.170602

“Sometimes it’s like this curtain just hangs there, casting a shadow on my life. There have been days when I can pull it aside and look out at the world. But I just can’t do that anymore.”

I nodded. Sitting in her dimly lit apartment, I had long suspected that this day would come. She had asked me to visit her, to talk about something urgent. Her elegant metaphor further strengthened my suspicion: she had spoken for many years about her willingness to die, and that right had recently been legally confirmed to Canadians.

“I’m glad you came. I need to ask you something important. But first, do you want some tea?”

“Thank you.”

She rose slowly from the frayed dark velvet chair, then shuffled to the kitchen, the empty teacup rattling against the saucer in her tremulous hand.

She looked back, craning her neck upward to peek around her bony shoulders above her kyphotic back. I wondered how tall she had been in her youth. When she had fled from occupying Russians and hid in the forest. When she had arrived in a new country with a new language and old wounds. When she married and had children and they married and had children.

But here we were. At the end of her story.

My hazy meandering cleared at the sound of her slippers brushing softly against the shaggy carpet. She laid aside her cane and dropped carefully into her chair.

“You see, I’ve grown very tired of this problem of mine. I know you can fix it.”

She had outlived her husband. Her friends. Most of her children. She was sound of mind, but her body was failing. Her smile belayed the electric pain transmitted from her mangled, arthritic fingers. She knew all of the important numbers by memory but could barely dial the phone.



Clouds gathered outside. This was one of those I Chose To Do Medicine To Help People moments. Whether it was called euthanasia or physician-assisted dying or medical assistance in dying, I was about to be asked to do something to help someone Do Something. To relieve suffering and respect her autonomy to make decisions about her body and about her life. I had followed the debates, read the court decisions and knew the challenge ahead. I didn’t feel ready, but when would I ever?

A deep nervous flutter filling my chest, I leaned forward and peered up to meet her inquisitive stare. “Whatever it is, I understand. I will do my best to help you. If you need to end your suffering, I can help.”

I smiled weakly and awaited her response.

“Well, it’s not easy, but it’s not suffering exactly.”

“Whatever it is, I respect your decisions. There is a process and it might take some time, but I will help you.”

“Process? I want it done today.”

I nearly fell off the couch. “I’m sorry,” I stammered, “but we have to get other opinions and find someone who is actually going to, you know, do it for you.”

“Well, that’s absurd,” she calmly replied. “I don’t want to wait. Can you just do it right now?”

“Madam!” I cried out in exasperation, “I can’t just end your life!”

“End my life? Listen, I’ve lived a long time and I’m ready to go peacefully when my time comes, but I still enjoy life. I asked you to come over because you’re the tallest person I know and I need someone to fix the fallen drapes over there by that window.”

I glanced to the side as the sun slid west and brightened the room.

**Eric Cadesky MDCM**  
Vancouver, BC

This article has been peer reviewed.

This is a true story. The patient has given her consent for this story to be told.