

DEATH CAN BE BEAUTIFUL

By Esther Rafaeli

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When my daughter Varda was about three and a half years old, we shared an incident which moved me to write a little poem about her. Part of it said:

*Once she saw the sunlight on the dimpling waves
And said, "Look Mummy, the water's smiling!"
I wondered at the imagery her three-year mind brought forth.
She often gives me cause to wonder, this child of mine.*

My daughter.

*How did I create this sprite?
This happy, jumping, laughing one –
Blue eyes sparkling, long legs dancing –
Summer skies disrupted now and then
By short-lived storms.*

My daughter.

Now some fifty odd years later, I am writing a eulogy, a tribute, to her. It's incredible. Three months after the event, it is still hard for me to get used to the idea that she is no longer with us. Several times a day I want to call her – to chat, to ask an opinion, to tell her a bit of gossip, or to arrange a dinner.

Varda had her first brush with cancer when she was in her early forties. Breast cancer. In the spirit of those days, she was able to have a lumpectomy, followed by chemotherapy. She lost her hair of course, but didn't bother to disguise this when she was at home. No fuss was made about it. Her children were quite young then, Avishai was about seven, Inbar, nine, and Itamar, twelve. I don't know what their reactions were then, but I remember an incident when Varda's hair had begun to grow back and she stopped

using her wig. She was attending a convention and a woman whom she didn't know, commented on her very short hairdo, "I wish I could crop my hair like that, but I don't dare." Varda smiled and accepted the compliment. Before the meeting was over, the woman returned to Varda and apologized profusely for her faux pas, having been told in the meantime the reason for the 'daring' hairdo.

Varda enjoyed some twelve years of good health and creative activity: writing, teaching, studying, and of course, caring for her children and household. She continued with her routine check-ups and we were always happy when the results were negative.

Varda was now living separately from her husband and asking for a divorce, which took a very long time coming through. In the year 2000, she received a Wexner Scholarship to the Kennedy School for Government at Harvard and went with her children to Boston for a year.

This was a pivotal moment in their lives. The Wexner group that year consisted of a group of talented, leading people from various professions who had come, with their families. Though strangers at first, strong friendships grew out of this experience, as the group studied hard and helped each other with the many problems and difficulties they encountered on the way. They were like an extended family and the children got used to being in the company of intelligent adults, which was a great boost for their self-confidence. They improved their English and had a taste of American life. Many maintained contact when they returned to Israel and continued professional and social relationships.

About three years ago, 2009-2010, to our horror, the cancer returned. Again chemotherapy, treatments, an attractive, stylish wig which she hated. She was included in

a pilot study to test a new biological drug. She had always been a vegetarian, but now she became more meticulous about her 'organic diet,' exercised regularly, and drank only green tea and carrot juice.

About 18 months later, in the late summer of '12, she began to suffer various discomforts from the side effects of the harsh treatments, but she assured us that these were side effects of the therapy and not from the cancer itself. I believed her, because no one enlightened me and partly because I wanted to believe, but it was only partly true. Other specialists, whom she consulted, all assured her that the symptoms would in time disappear.

She was still working creatively full time, on new textbooks for the TALI elementary school for a project called 'Friends Across the Sea.' She developed and promoted the theory of 'Peoplehood' and the need to bring Israel and the Diaspora closer together. There were several publications on this subject.

During that summer, Karni accompanied Varda on one of her visits to her oncologist, Dr. Bella Kaufman. She told Varda to take a three-month break from the treatment.

"But why?" asked Varda, "It is preventing the cancer from spreading."

"Yes," replied Dr. Kaufman, "the biological treatment stops the cancer spreading, but what is the good of that if your body can't hold out? It's like the saying, 'the operation was successful, but the patient died.' We don't want that, do we? We will reconsider after three months."

Karni only told me about this meeting recently and it put everything into perspective. It became clear to me that Varda was very aware of her situation all along.

In October, 2012, she decided to make a trip to Tuscany with Yalli, one of her close friends whom she had known since kindergarten. They enjoyed seeing the places and artworks which they had studied in their History of Art classes while doing their B.A. at the Hebrew University. She had taken her B.A. degree in Archaeology and History of Art, but she did her second degree in Contemporary Judaism. Now she began planning to do her Ph.D. in Contemporary Judaism, with a study of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and his influence.

After her trip to Tuscany, her 'side-effects' became even more troublesome and she began to spend more time in bed, but I was always invited for Shabbat dinner. On Sunday, January 20, she felt extremely ill and asked her daughter to take her to the Emergency Room, at Sha'arei Tzedek hospital. Inbar called her uncles, Varda's brothers, Asi and Lonny, to come, and also Hagit, a close friend who lived near the hospital. Inbar's younger brother Avishai, is training to be a paramedic as part of his army service, and at this time, on ambulance duty at the same hospital. On that day, to his surprise, he discovered his mother and other members of the family there in the emergency room. I was in touch by phone.

After hours of tests and check-ups, Varda was sent home. I was very surprised, but when they added that she would be getting 'Home Hospice' care, under the supervision of the Hospice Department of the hospital, I understood the situation. She would certainly not have agreed to be moved anywhere else, and she wanted to be cared for at home by her children. The oxygen tank was brought in and a variety of pain killers, including morphine sweets' lay on the bedside table. A kind of numbness of feeling set in as we all realized the gravity of the situation. There were no hysterics, no need to talk;

everyone did their allotted job, but a heavy cloud hung over us, uniting us in this awesome scene playing out before us.

As soon as the word had gone round, Varda's home became a Grand Central Station. It was like a *shiva* before the death. Varda's children were there all the time and the extended family came and went. There was a constant flow of colleagues and friends. Varda's girlfriends took turns providing food, but we didn't have any organized meals: whoever was hungry helped themselves out of the pots and pans.

Varda wanted to see and talk to everybody, to say goodbye, but it soon became obvious that it was too much for her and her children began to regulate the flow. Varda ate very little, a few spoons of soup, or fresh applesauce, and began to use morphine suckers. Later on she had biscuits made with marijuana, but she limited her intake because she was afraid to get 'addicted'!

She was conscious most of the time, but very weak. Occasionally, when the weather was nice, she got up and sat a little on the balcony. She asked her lawyer to come so she could explain to her children the arrangements she had made regarding their future plans. She told Asi and Lonny, that she wished to be buried beside her father, Alex, to which they immediately attended. In fact I had an unnerving experience when I went to visit my mother's grave on the anniversary of her death, Tu'B'shvat. The workers were already there preparing the lot. It hypnotized me as if I could see Varda lying there. The workers were surprised that I stood watching them. When I told them the grave was for my daughter, they were visibly shocked.

Varda also discussed the funeral service with her brothers. She wanted a traditional Jewish one followed by some additional 'secular' readings and favorite songs. Whatever she wanted was done. That was the rule.

Karni stayed with Varda the whole time except for Shabbat when she went home to her family in Ra'anana.

"Where do you sleep?" I asked, knowing that all of the children were at home.

"With Varda," she answered.

I was startled. Such an idea would not have occurred to me, but for Karni it was natural. She felt that her presence had a calming effect on Varda and helped allay any fears she had. She herself wanted to be as close to her sister as possible.

Inbar also slept or rested there occasionally, and once when Lonny's daughter Carmel, came with her baby, my new great grandson, Ilai, he also kept Varda company. When I saw the photo which Carmel took, I thought, how symbolic. If I wanted to participate in a photo competition, I would send this picture and call it, 'An End and a Beginning.'

During the second week, starting January 27th, Varda's good friend Marian, a Reform Rabbi, came especially from New York, to spend three days with her. Varda, though weak, was in a good mood and they enjoyed the time they had together. Both knew it was their last meeting. Marian left on Wednesday evening.

My late brother's son Jonathan arrived from London and Varda was happy to see him, but there was little real conversation. Together with his sister Naomi, who lives in Ra'anana, the number of people in the house increased. There were also the two girlfriends of Varda's sons, Maya who is in a serious relationship with Itamar, helped out

wherever needed, while Meitar, being a newcomer to the family, kept discreetly in the background.

Early on Thursday morning, Varda felt very bad and called her sons from their beds. They rang the Hospice doctor who came and checked Varda. He sedated her and left pain killers and instructions. The sudden change from the previous days upset everyone. I came to the house in the afternoon and was happy to see that Jonathan had arrived. I went into the bedroom and sat down by the bed. I kissed Varda's forehead and held her hand. "Mummy's here," I said, "do you want to eat?"

When I tried to feed her apple sauce or chicken soup, she couldn't take more than a few spoonfuls. Her mind began to wander. She looked at me unseeingly, eyes wide open, and such a strange look that I was a little frightened. I wondered what she was seeing. I stroked her hand and began singing an old favorite children's song, *Al Sfat HaNachal*. This song is addressed to the child hearing the song and the names of siblings are added in turn. A faint smile crossed Varda's lips and she fell asleep. I knew by that smile, that she had heard me.

All was quiet. I chatted a little with Jonathan and then went home at about seven-thirty. I felt guilty about leaving but I was tired out and there was nowhere to rest. I didn't think the end was so immanent. I was told later on that other members of the family gradually came in. About nine o'clock, Varda, unconscious part of the time, began to suffer strong pains. The Home Hospice was called and sent a male nurse. He gave an injection of morphine but this didn't seem to help. After awhile he gave a second injection which also didn't help. Only a third injection directly into her tummy calmed her down and she fell asleep.

It was getting late. Jonathan and Naomi, and my son-in-law, Shuki, left to Ra'anana, Asi and Shirley were staying in Jerusalem, and Lonny, with his younger daughter Tal, left for Tel Aviv. However, before they reached half-way, they were called back by Itamar. Varda was breathing very heavily and they suspected that the end was near. They sat around the bed to wait. Karni found a *siddur* and read the 'Vidui' or 'Confession on a Death Bed'. Inbar played, Varda's favorite songs, until she fell asleep. At 2:25, they suddenly realized that Varda had stopped breathing and that her soul had quietly slipped away.

They waited ten minutes as the medic had told them, and then called the Hospice to report. An ambulance was sent, as an ECG had to be done to ascertain the death, but when the medic arrived, Avishai insisted on doing this last act for his mother, assisted by Meitar, who was an officer in the Paramedic Unit. Then most of the company moved silently into the living room while Itamar and Avishai tidied up the room before calling the *Hevra Kadisha*.

I woke on Friday morning at six a.m. and thought it a good sign that I wasn't called during the night, but at 6:15, Karni phoned and announced that she and Lonny and Tal were coming to have a cup of tea. "What do you mean? What happened?" I demanded, and Karni said, "ורדה איננה, she passed away at 2:25." My heart skipped a beat and I felt a heavy blow to my stomach. It was all over. After they arrived, tears were shed and I was told of the events of the evening as related above. We had tea, and soon Asi arrived. We settled down to making funeral arrangements, preparing press announcements, sending emails, and making phone calls. All became busy attending to

the various details, functioning under the stress of the time element of Shabbat approaching. The funeral was set for the following Sunday morning.

That same Friday evening, dinner had already been arranged at my place in honor of Jonathan, and most of the family was present. It was our first dinner without Varda and before the *Kiddush*, there was a strange, expectant moment: Varda had always sung *Shalom Aleichem*. Instinctively, I began to sing as Varda always did. Varda's children wept quietly and I could barely finish the song. It was sad, but it turned into a nice, close-together, family evening.

The following Friday night, at the end of the *shiva*, we had dinner at my home again, provided by Varda's Wexner friends, a much appreciated gesture. We were twenty, including Lonny's ex-wife, Yuli, the mother of his children, who was also in mourning for her own mother who had passed away a few days before. After the meal, the young started to sing, as they often did, and we sang our hearts out for a couple of hours: *zemirot*, old songs that we had sung with my parents, Varda's favorites, the classic songs of Israel, anything that came to mind. It was catharsis in action. By the time they left, everyone felt relaxed and comforted.

The funeral, the shiva, and the memorial meeting on the 30th day, were amazing; so many friends, colleagues, and friends of the children, such an outpouring of love and appreciation and sorrow. It was a shock to me to discover that I really hardly knew my daughter. We had spent a lifetime together and were mostly on good terms, in spite of differences in politics. I knew she was a hard worker and a bit of a perfectionist (she liked to correct my English occasionally), devoted to her kids, and had a great sense of humor,

but I never realized she was such a serious professional person, working in a team, creating and developing new ideas, caring for friends, and helping those in need.

Varda, you did not have an easy life, yet you made it creative and meaningful, full of love and good times. You built a beautiful life, and your last days, with your family and friends, were equally beautiful and unforgettable. Now you rest in peace, and your memory will always be for a blessing.

You made me very proud.