

The Conversation Project in Boulder County-Role Play

Characters:

- Narrator
- Nancy: mother and the terminally ill person
- Anita: daughter
- Bob: son

Narrator: The setting is a hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Daughter Anita (age 48) has just arrived from Colorado after being summoned by her mother. The mother, Nancy (78) has told her daughter that she has been diagnosed with Stage 4 melanoma that has already spread to her brain. She asks Anita to come as soon as possible. Anita arrives 2 days later. Nancy had been having headaches for weeks and a seizure took her to the hospital 4 days ago.

Anita: Hello mom. Oh, I am so sorry to hear about what is happening with you. I am sorry that I couldn't come right away. I had some important work meetings. Tell me what the doctors are saying.

Nancy: They tell me that this is very serious and that I won't recover. One oncologist said that say that they can give me chemotherapy to "hold it at bay" for a while. The neurologist, however, didn't seem to think that chemo would be effective. I have seen friends go through chemotherapy and I just don't want to do it. I really want to go home. They made me wait until you got here because of the seizures. The social worker was in and mentioned hospice. That is what I want to do. Remember, that I have named you as my decision-maker.

Anita: You mentioned that on the phone. I didn't think you were serious. Bob is the oldest. Does he know about that? He was Dad's decision-maker and I thought he was yours, as well. When is he coming?

Nancy: I called him yesterday and he will be here in two days. I didn't talk to him about anything. You know that I was not happy with how he handled things with your father. Even though your dad said he did not want heroic measures, Bob insisted on that pacemaker, which only prolonged things. Fortunately, I don't think your father knew what was going on, but I sure did and I think he suffered, needlessly. I don't think I can trust him to do what I want.

Anita: I don't think he is going to be happy about this. Is he still the executor of your estate?

Nancy: Yes, I did leave him in charge of all of that. Anita, I really don't want to talk about this anymore. We can look at the paperwork after I get home.

Narrator: Nancy went home but that evening, she had more seizures and was becoming less lucid. Anita was able to find the advance directive paperwork, which was signed and notarized two weeks earlier. Anita found additional copies in the envelope. Had NANCY intended to send them to her children?

The next day, Bob arrives.

Bob: Hello Anita. How is mom doing?

Anita: Not well at all. The hospice nurse and social worker came by this morning. They are giving her morphine and a sedative for the pain and restlessness. She is lucid when awake but miserable.

Bob: I don't understand why she didn't want the chemotherapy. I spoke with the doctor yesterday and he seemed to think that it would help to shrink the tumor and buy her more time. I am going to talk to her and convince her to do that. I want to take her back to the doctor and see if he can talk some sense into her.

Anita: Bob, she doesn't want that. Furthermore, she has given me permission to make decisions for her when she cannot.

Bob: Hey...since when? I have a copy of the documents that she and Dad did 5 years ago, with that lawyer of theirs. I am her decision-maker.

Anita: Well, she changed her mind and appointed me. She saw what a hard time you had honoring Dad's wishes.

Bob: I cannot believe this! Let me see those papers! And I cannot believe you. Are you simply going to let her die without putting up a fight? How irresponsible can you be? Are you trying to get rid of her? Is it too much of an inconvenience for you to be here to take care of her? Is that what this is about? I need to go and talk to Mom.

Anita: Don't go in there and upset her. She has her mind made up. She talked it over with the oncologist. Of course, they wanted her to have treatments but she was very clear with both of her doctors.

Bob: Anita, you are going to regret this. How do I know if you are telling the truth about what she wanted? What kind of a daughter are you, anyway?

Narrator: Bob and Anita went into the back bedroom and found Nancy in a deep sleep. Bob tried to rouse her but she was very groggy and couldn't talk to him. He stormed out and went to stay at a hotel nearby. The next morning, Nancy was no clearer. She died 2 days later, with Anita and Bob at her side. She had made arrangements at the time of her husband's death to be cremated but she had left no other directions and Bob and Anita squabbled plenty as they put together a memorial service for her.

Because Bob was the executor, he made decisions about Nancy's financial matters. To this day, they are barely speaking and Anita is certain that Bob did not fairly handle the distribution of her mother's meager estate.

DISCUSSION: What went wrong here? What might have helped this to go better? Could this happen in your family?