

I wrote this in the summer of 2012, shortly after I was misdiagnosed with multiple sclerosis. A few weeks later the diagnosis changed to Parkinson's disease.

How to Die. Oh, Really?

Were you shocked by the June 11, 2012, *Time* magazine cover? It consisted of three white words against a red background: **How to Die**. I nearly had a heart attack when I saw it.

A few days earlier I had visited a neurologist whom I had been seeing for more than a year for tremors and a growing weakness in my right arm and right leg. At this appointment he gave me two possible diagnoses: either *amyotrophic lateral sclerosis* (ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease) or *multiple sclerosis*. He said he would know for sure which disease I had after he received the results of a spinal tap.

I went home and researched both illnesses. To my mind, ALS was worse by far, a grueling, gruesome death sentence. In 2011, a New York Times writer who has ALS published an essay about his illness, in which he nicknames it "Lou," as if it were a friend. His essay is both funny and stark (kind of like me):

If I choose to have the tracheotomy that I will need in the next several months to avoid choking and perhaps dying of aspiration pneumonia, the respirator and the staff and support system necessary to maintain me will easily cost half a million dollars a year. Whose half a million, I don't know.

I'd rather die.

At which point he discusses his plans to commit suicide before the disease progresses much farther. “I have found the way” to off himself, he says. “Not a gun. A way that’s quiet and calm.”

I barely slept the next few nights, and spent much of my mental energy composing a farewell speech to the staff at the Bronx charter school where I work. (*“For much of my childhood I was an enfant terrible; and for much of my adulthood, too. But boy, did I travel a lot! ...”*)

Then I saw the *Time* cover when I went into the staff bathroom at school. Someone had left a copy face up on the table by the door. **How to Die**. It was aimed right at me like a loaded gun – perhaps the very gun that the New York *Times* writer had tossed aside. I couldn’t bring myself to read the article, and walked around like a zombie for the rest of the day.

I averaged two hours of sleep per night for the next few days, in part because that *Time* cover greeted me every time I went into the staff bathroom. I finally got the nerve to read the article, at which point I discovered the cover heading **How to Die** was misleading. The article was really about the health care industry and how the elderly parents of the author died in its care.

You’d think a magazine with **How to Die** on its cover would actually contain a “how to” article, answering essential questions such as: *What is the exact process of dying? What’s the latest from the Hemlock Society? How do you prioritize a bucket list? Can I wear my designer glasses right through to the end?*

A week later, I returned to my neurologist’s office, where he pronounced ALS off the table; he was sure I had MS. Please shout “Hooray!” A diagnosis of MS can be a

wonderful thing. MS has many potential, sometimes severe, downsides, depending on what form of the disease you have, but it's not a death sentence. The Center for Disease Control does not list it as a deadly disease. Anne Romney has MS and she keeps the symptoms at bay via the horseback riding sport of dressage. I thought of buying a pony.

Shortly after that, Jack Osbourne, a celebrity, was diagnosed with MS himself. In the media hoopla that followed his announcement, *People* magazine put him and his mother, also a celebrity, on the cover of the July 12 issue. In blaring yellow letters, the cover screamed, "I Won't Let My Son Die!"

I saw this cover when I was riding the NY subway, en route to more doctor appointments for a second and third opinion. At one of the newsstands in the subway, there were Sharon and Jack Osbourne on the cover of *People*, mugging for the camera, with Sharon shouting that Jack was doomed to die but not if she could help it. Every time my train pulled into another station, in addition to people on the platform I saw *People* on the newsstand racks. And those blazing yellow words, "I Won't Let My Son Die!"

My reaction this time: This was sensational bullshit. *People* was totally off base.

Angry at Time Warner for publishing two hyped-up covers, I created bright yellow mailing labels that read:

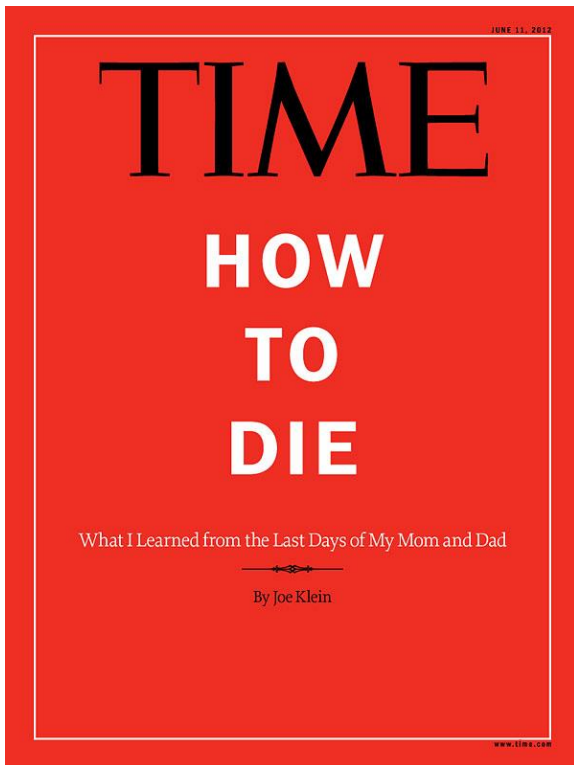
L.F.T.S.

Later For This Shit

***People* Publishes
Misleading, Sensational
Claptrap!**

I printed a few hundred of these babies and slapped them on every *People* cover I saw. At subway newsstands, supermarket checkout counters, library magazine racks, any place where masses of people would see them.

And now I'm sitting in jail, having been arrested for disturbing the peace and for sticking one of my yellow labels on the arresting officer's forehead. They have me in isolation because they think my illness, MS, or my general condition, is contagious. Just outside my cell is an officer's desk, and on the desk is a recent issue of *Ms.* magazine. The cover's letters M and S are staring me right in the face.



NY Times article about ALS:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/opinion/sunday/10als.html?pagewanted=all>