Palliative and Supportive Care

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Essay/Personal Reflection

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Room 328

Paul Rousseau

I glance in the room; a late December sun sifts through half-shuttered windows, settling on her face. Her eyes are closed, her hair sweat-soaked and glued to her forehead in crescent curls. She's 52 years old, in the middle of life, at the end of life.

Her husband stands, moves to her bedside, then steps back. He picks up a cup then sets it down. He does this repeatedly, robotically. He's unsure and unknowing, afraid to do, afraid not to do. He's learned there's a distracting comfort in repetition.

I knock and enter. The air is impenetrable and rank.

"Doctor." He reluctantly greets me, knowing the reason for my visit. He wants to be anywhere but here. So do I.

His eyes travel the room, then settle on the door. I see tears.

"I can come back…"

He nods for me to sit, but he stands, for he can't sit. It's as if he sits, she'll leave, she'll be gone forever. He wrings his hands, over and over, like a shamanic ritual, all the while pacing back and forth. He doesn't know what to do; he's lost his place in the world. It's like he's in a land of hiatus, not moving forward and not moving backwards, stuck like a candy bar jammed in a vending machine.

I look at Mrs. Jones. Her skin is sickly and sallow, hanging like wilted flowers. She needs a lung transplant, but her condition is too weak and her disease too extensive. So now, here she is, lingering, with only hours of life, and an eternity of death.

"Hello Mrs. Jones." She doesn't respond. I knew she wouldn't; it was propriety and respect.

I turn to her husband. He speaks in a voice cracked and shuddering, his words despaired. I hear of a horrible disease—scleroderma—and of two daughters in their twenties. And of 32 years of marriage, and two years of sickness.

As I sit, we both want this to go away, for everything to be as it was. But it won't, she's dying.

My mind, like an old mental cinema, replays the past as a ghost sits at my side. A woman I spent 30 years with, and with whom I had two daughters, died of the same disease, at the same age, as Mrs. Jones. And like Mrs. Jones, was denied a lung transplant. My daughters were also in their 20s. And the ghost, her ghost, is here now, in the room, in the bed, in my grief.

I cry, he cries, as if squeezing the salt from our bodies will cleanse the hurt. I cradle his shoulders, and offer presence. It's all I have.

"Doctor, I need some time with her."

I nod.

He has words to say that pass only between husband and wife. I understand; I did the same. We are caregivers joined by a horrific disease. He thanks me, and offers his hand. I hug him instead.

He walks to her bed. I watch as he whispers in her ear. "I love you so much. It's okay to go, we'll be fine." My lips grimace in a murmured sob. I open the door and leave. The dull, fluorescent shadows of the hallway blur my sorrow; still, the nurses stare.

Outside, the evening sky is winter gray, the trees barren and still. The wind swirls, sprinkled with snowflakes. I watch a lone flake fall to my coat and disappear, its life, like ours, tenuous and transient. I look up to the sky, and amid the haze of a cloudy moon, in a room with a dimmed light—her room, room 328—time, always so fleeting and final, nears an end.

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