Palliative and Supportive Care

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Memento Mori

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Essay/Personal Reflection

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Thin sheets of rain dropped soft glimmers on the otherwise sunlit day. To the east lay a scattering of foothills, jagged with their knife-like treetops. Above them, the vast and deep-blue sky cast upward from the trees, sutured to the green hills below as if the two were made of distant fabrics. As I stood beside the ridge of homes, the valley below brimmed with beauty and newness: it was spring.

Turning from the parking lot, I strolled through a tiny courtyard, bordered on all sides by the patios of condominiums. Knocking on one of the doors, I was greeted by a woman well into her seventies, about my height, with a quiet and humble elegance. "You must be the young man we're looking for," she said, inviting me in. "Thank you so much for coming." I entered the home, unmistakable in its old oak smell. The world inside slowed like a bridgeless dream; a quiet air settled around us, wearily lit through the thin-sheeted curtains. I glanced backward, recalling the skies and trees.

As I passed into the living room, I encountered a bookshelf. Around this collection, which spanned the entire living room wall, were hung small pieces of artwork, mostly religious. And beneath the shelf—beneath hundreds of fragrant, time-worn manuscripts—sat the man, silent, motionless, hunched in a sofa chair, dying of a neurological disease which hobbled his physical world. I stood there a moment, wrapped in the tired light and old oak smells. "This is my husband," the woman said, turning to him with a gentle smile. "Honey, the young man is here to help us with the table. Come say hello."

The man rose softly and shakily. Whatever he lacked in physical strength, he exceeded in physical presence. His face mimicked the old Greek philosophers, had those philosophers boasted the mountain-ridged irises and mischievous eyebrows which he so proudly wore. His hands were still strong, and he looked at me through diagnostic eyes. "A pleasure to meet you," he muttered, in the low and dignified voice of a dying man. "We're grateful for your help."

Twenty minutes later, I had taken apart their dining room table and placed its components in a stairwell closet. That, as a hospice volunteer, was the purpose for my visit. Having done my duty, I turned towards the door, eyes ablaze with the promise of spring. Then a voice called from behind.

"You will stay for coffee and tea, won't you?"

Slits of sun shone from the window to the floor, leaving alternating bars of light and shadow. Even as the wife called, I was already passing into that world of brightness and springtime—that declaration of life and youth—as a plank, carried by the waves which bear it towards the beach, is engrossed in a singular momentum.

In its cherry blossom radiance, the spring seemed eternal. The home's aged weariness, on the other hand, troubled me as a first gray hair troubles a man obsessed with beauty. That unmistakable disparity seemed to beg an intractable question: How does one reconcile the beauty and wonder of life, with the humbling reality of death?

With a hesitant air I looked at the man, white-haired and hunched over his walker, wondering if he, too, was troubled. But I did not think he was. In my mind he looked calm, satisfied. His eyes gazed endlessly forward, with an air of ponderance, not despair. The lines on his face—worn and entrenched—were lines of laughter. In that moment, I felt as though I had stared through a keyhole, glimpsing the outline of a figure before me, and I yearned to see more. Somewhere, buried in the mountain of that man's life, lay the answer to my question. Reluctantly, uncertainly, I answered the wife. "Coffee, please."

As she left to prepare, the man and I traversed his wall-sized bookshelf. Above, below, before us were the greats of English literature, perched upon the gray-brown bookshelf like ravens. The man moved slowly, purposefully; his eyes searched, almost smelled their way across the collection. And then they stopped. Third-to-right column, second-to-top shelf, fourth book on the right. A blue, nondescript binding with Latin on the spine: *Memento Mori*.

Remember you must die

The man pointed towards the book, and I reached for the blue line in a sea of brown-leather bindings. He wanted me to have it. I looked down at the book, ripe with the smell of old printing, and thanked the man. It was a novel about a group of people who receive mysterious telephone calls, all containing one unvarying message: *Remember you must die*. An odd message, no doubt. I turned the phrase over in my mind, until the wife called out again: pastries were ready in the kitchen.

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The three of us sat to coffee and croissants. For the first time I focused on the man and his wife, together. "You're a wonderful woman," he said, as she lowered him into the chair. "I don't care what they say about you." The wife chuckled, looking at him with warm, knowing eyes. The man then began describing his disease, telling me how it had changed his world, inside and out, until… until he could not remember its name. His eyes widened: how could one forget the name of one's own disease?

Surely, this man's omission was—in contrast to the title of that book—a reason to remember the shine, the birdsong, the blooming of lilacs and spring; not the fact that one must die. This act of forgetting said, to me, that we may exist in the most humble and ascetic of inner worlds, colored with the quiet, humming hymns of impermanence, but even these require the workings of an outer world—the beauty of spring, the firing of neurons—which must be either enjoyed, or ignored.

I thought of that outer world. How obvious, how potent, how striking seemed its colorful hills and tree-cut skies, stark against the time-worn bookshelf and sonorous shadows. Warmed by the glimmer of the post-rain sun, one felt that life was forever on the rise, out there, moving upward like the ballast of a ship upon a wave. Aging and death seemed distant, unfortunate, unthinkable in comparison. Of far greater primacy was the inarguable beauty of dawn, daffodils, youth. "Remember *this*," the spring seemed to say, "This will outlast even summer, winter, death."

But was it so? Even the most abloom of fields would turn lion-colored in summer, burst and fade in autumn, grow cold and bare in winter. All who bargained their hearts on spring's youth would remember, with sadness, this fact. And quite unlike the spring itself—which would return, cyclically, in time—the lives, bodies, and hearts of those gamblers would move in only one direction. And so the spring would fulfill its destiny, but fill no one's grasp.

Remember you must die

Even this man, this dying man, had forgotten the name of his disease. His wife reminded him, taking hold of his hand. "Oh yes," he arched back, "That's right." They smiled at one another, chuckled once more, their hands facing upwards, as if releasing a grip.

We finished our coffee, and it was time for me to leave. In a few short moments, I would reenter the sunlit spring, the azure sky welcoming me through the front door, bidding me forget. I stood up and watched the wife lift her husband, grabbing his wrists and rocking until the two generated enough momentum to exit the stratosphere of his chair. The man grabbed hold of his walker and shuffled, slowly, through the light and shadows which now blended beside the bookshelf. "A wonderful disease," he said, as I glanced back at his gift. "Reminds one of the limitations one should have recognized earlier."

I thanked the two and left. Outside, suddenly, the sun seemed brighter, the trees greener. I noticed for the first time the white and pink blossoms, blooming together like supernovas. The hills, tree-notched in the horizon, stood stark against the diamond sky.

For so long I had ached to leave the home, reminder of all that was not young, reviving. And yet the subtle glances, the loving remembrances of the man and wife called me back the moment I had left. There was something about the place, the people, but I could not say what. Only gaze endlessly at the valley below, full of life and spring; and return to my car where, in the pre-ignition silence, I felt again that strange blend of light and shadow. And then a voice, one last voice—a key, unlocking the door which I had yearned to open. I passed through, eyes wide, solemn, joyful with spring and impermanence. This world, my world, was always moving, always passing, and somehow all the more beautiful for it.

Memento mori. The voice rang still.

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