

A Guide to Every Death and A Little Life



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Abstract

The following is a narrativized story of my experience rotating in palliative care. It is lively.

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Perspective

Your shoes will be dirty. You meant to clean them. The winter wore the soles of your feet into an uncomfortable, whitening eternity. But you will need to try your best now to remove the ghostly grime, scruff off the evidence of those ceaseless streets, check the heel for thick crud, and watch the tears fall onto the ground you just dirtied with your steps as you tell her that her husband has died.

Start with their name. Say it until it swells in your throat. Repeat it even if you cannot breathe. Especially if you cannot.

Sit beside her. The chair will be ruined by the shape of the human form. Fake leather will flake into corners like a wild, hungry beast. An armrest will be missing. It will always be the left one.

Hold her hand. Those in better positions with better judgement will tell you that this is inappropriate in the palliative care ward. They are right. It is awful. Not fitting. No one should have to go through this loss. Each death is the worst. Each life is the best one, the only one.

Know that the hospital light will be very wrong and the noise from another room will be very loud and your shoes will continue be very dirty during this terrible, terrible thing, but you must go on. Give up the busyness. Submit to her. Realize she is the only thing that matters in the universe. She is the universe. And she lost her universe too.

Look at the leaky language you possess. Words like these will not be enough. They were made as an afterthought of existence. But you will have to rely on them like a dog does to a leash made of a single string or how an entire civilization can rest on a hill's edge.

Mention how it happened without embellishment or any such poetic posturing. The air will be starving for truth. It will ring cold in your dry, broken mouth.

Understand that there will be no way to say it. Therefore, you will need to say it every way. Explain that it was during the deep night, unexpectedly. Recall any small thing, any fact, any question. Repeat the name here too.

Prevent yourself from saying anything afterwards. Listen to how her voice will rattle with mantras learned in childhood that everything will be alright and that things can be repaired and how this too shall awfully, totally, irrevocably pass. The sentences will sound distant despite their closeness, swallowed despite being mouthed. They will ring. They will last in this ward forever.

Listen further to how before this hall with its bare furniture and frost-bitten window, there was summer made from blonde hair, how green, gracious, giving eyes can rival any garden, how sometimes gardens would not grow but he would try and she would watch blessed by the warmth and his boots would slop in soiled like yours are now. Footprints would weep on the floor.

She will mention to you that she thinks these muddy puddles represented something more than an accidental imprint. They were a sadness that pulled all waters like the moon, that whispered during every moment of every wet, squirming creation, that dressed a wedding, that cracked open when someone lost their keys, that explained how hard it was for humanity all over the world, and that despite this crawling, liquid sorrow, saw him take another step, radiance with a smile, love with light, planting orchid seeds brought in from Africa during a trip years ago.

Him. Him. Him. Listen to how those damn things never blossomed. Him. Him. Him. Listen to how he still nurtured the ground, hoping, happy, hers. Listen to him, him, him, now that he wasn't him any longer. After she has breathed a lifetime, ask if she would like to see him again. Spent, she will tell you that she

has never stopped seeing him. He is here, she will say. She will point nowhere.

Use your unclean boots to stand up, solid, holding her hands still. Take her towards the room she had spent the last two weeks in. See the pictures of him young – bare chested, salted from some ocean, soaking in sun. Smell the old coconut candles that were lit when no one was around to object. Hear the sniffing silence.

Close the door. They will need to be alone.

Wait outside. Do not gaze at your phone. Do not fill in a chart. Hours or months or years may pass, and you must be singularly present like a star that even after it is gone, still radiates.

She will come out when she is unready. Take her hand one more time. Bring her back to the chair. Understand that you should never leave her. You must never let go. You cannot stop comforting her. You have to ceaselessly heed her words, sit on this faux leather, moult in it, become it, absorb it as an animal

becoming an animal all the while other patients want some new medication, different families try to make sense of terminal illnesses, nurses monitor vitals diligently, doctors spill into rooms, and you – that animal, that chair, that support – must remain indefatigable, lasting, whatever is needed before it is for her by her because of her.

Then, get up.

Apologize.

Slowly shuffle.

Knock the door of the next room.

Clean your shoes on the mat that reads, "Welcome."

Apologize again, this time for interrupting.

Walk into the darkness to check if there is a little life in there too.



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