

The day I took Mama to the nursing home

Outside it was light-filled as only a warm western morning can be, sky arching wide for all the birds to fly without touching wings. So many times had I seen patients on days such as these and wished I could dispel their air of unease, help them stretch their arms and not finger illness and death.

Inside her own house for the last time, the back of her rocking chair shaping her spine, her talk an excuse to linger a while, Mama says she cannot bear to leave behind, throw, tear, yellowed slips of paper, leases and bills from faded years, smudged letters refolded, fragile with creases; they fall to pieces when I bring them to her.

How can I begrudge her this moment, one I've been unable to stay? So I haul scrapbooks crammed open, a blue stole with jagged moth-holes, a scraped antique ring, with jade stone missing, like the pendant she wore at my birth — its silver chain the sole remnant of that joy-ragged hour — all jammed into drawers, like those of countless others, like those of all mothers grown old with pain.

Cardboard boxes askew, some empty, most full, lie on the bare floor of the home where she nested so long. Mama, it's late, we can't take it all. I hate saying the words. She nods yes at last, clutches a fallen tile from the kitchen wall, fast to her chest. Shadows lengthen inside, hoverings from the past. I don't have the spark to protest.

I knew then as I know it still; she felt the cold in her bones — but no more than I did. On that lambent day with its honed ray of chill, I grew old as well, when Mama stopped rocking, still as a fallen bird with a broken wing. Her fluttering sigh is trapped in my mind, spilling out of my hoard of sleepless nights. I see her wave with one hand, then my sight is sapped, my eyes bored by the hot, taunting sun.

Some other doctor soon will see
Mama in her nursing home; and I —
I will dream of grown birds unable to fly.

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on such short notice, but I'll be over in an hour or so."

By the time Frank hung up the phone, the Spencers were passing by the desk, on their way home. Breen studied their faces, trying to understand how they could abandon a child. He saw no peace in their expression, only bitterness and resignation. And he felt a twinge of pity.

The shift was nearly over. But there was the usual backlog of patients to attend to, so Frank hurried off, eager to put this case behind him. As he passed by the pediatric stretcher, he saw David there alone now, reading a book that Marie had dug up for him. She had brought him some milk and a couple of digestive biscuits as if hoping to soften the blow.

An hour and a half later David was marched out of the department, Wilson, the social worker, at his side. As much as he tried not to, Breen imagined David buckling himself into the back seat of the social worker's car, preparing for the lonely drive to temporary foster care. He pictured his arrival at another house to face a melancholy room with crisp, clean sheets on a sagging cot and second-hand toys to amuse himself with. He felt sure David would mistrust the new foster parents. He would remember a dozen, a hundred other adults, their faces blurred together.

"Stop it," he told himself. "Stop dwelling on the kid."

He saw Marie at the pediatric stretcher, tidying up. Having worked with her for years, he had come to know Marie well. He recognized her desire to shut out thoughts by focusing on simple tasks. Feeling a need to commiserate, he walked over to her as she picked up the drawing that David had left behind. Together they peered at the sketch of a boy with a down-turned mouth and tears leaping from his eyes, the central portion mended with Marie's application of tape. Beside this sad-eyed figure David has added a smiling woman in a nurse's uniform, her arm extended around his shoulder.

Beneath this was written: "To my nurse, from David."

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