

## Room for a view

## Next to the living room

I step into the room and absence fills me. It fills my eyes, my pockets, my lungs. As a doctor, come to sign the certificate of death, I only make the absence thicker. Not long ago she breathed loudly, and now she doesn't move. Her family and I are for a short time together, but it is absence that we feel. Her body is turned slightly to the wall, and some of her family stand near the doorway. An elderly man — her husband, I presume — sits next to the bed, stroking her hand. In the living room someone speaks on the phone, saying something about cancer; the rest is unclear and then the weary voice fades. I look at her again. I wonder, as I usually do at such times, what does it mean to be dead?

I nod to her husband, set down my bag, withdraw my stethoscope and pull back the sheet to listen to her chest. I hear a muffled silence. It is as if some silence has turned thick and dull inside her. Her husband looks at her, and some of the others in the room are watching me. I look at them and tell them that she has neither heart sounds nor sounds of breathing, and that this means she has died. No one has expected to hear anything else, but they have waited to hear something just the same. A young woman who I think is her daughter sobs once, then lifts her head and nods. I become an extension of an impossible occurrence — somehow it has happened that she is absent.

Her husband comes with me to the dining room table, and we sit down together. He looks tired and seems slightly relieved to have a moment of distraction. He watches me sort through my papers. His grief will prepare itself, but for the moment the only herald is a strangely ordinary feeling. In the days to come, I imagine, he will compare this feeling to waiting at home for a taxi just before a

long trip. One's bags are packed, the house is in order, so much is about to begin, and yet one simply waits in a chair feeling ordinary.

"I need to know just a few things about your wife," I tell him. I want to say I am sorry that I don't know how it was when she lived and that I am meeting her when I cannot meet her, but I stay silent, feeling a little awkward. I begin to write her name on the certificate. Her daughter speaks from the doorway of the bedroom and begins to tell me about her mother. I learn that she loved tennis. It surprises me to imagine that before I existed she might have thought to herself some summer day, "Perhaps this evening I will play tennis." There are photos on the wall, and without my asking her husband says, "That was when we were married." There he is in uniform, and there she is hugging him. They are both smiling. He tells me that they were married when he returned from the war. She became a teacher and he became an engineer. They lived in small towns in Ontario and British Columbia and then moved to Toronto to live near their children. I hear about an orchard, a fire, swimming in the sea.

Here are the edges of her life. I won't ever know the sound of crickets as she heard them, picking apples, or know the feel of flames that made her squint as their house burned into the night, or how the sea once spoke to her in its waves. Yet the edges of her life found me because her family gave them to me.

The phrase is sparse: "I completed the death certificate." Only a machine



Fred Sebastian

listens to these words. I am under the streetlight, in the shadow of my car, dictating a visit note. The night is cold this time of year. In the apartment block I have just left several lights are on, and I wonder what the other occupants are doing. I wonder if any of them know that she has died. I sit in the car and think of what I don't know of her. I feel the absence of someone I will never meet, and I begin to realize that this might still be some sort of being. I think of my wife and my little son, asleep across the city, and consider that all of us, without our knowing and without our feeling it, exist in just such a way. We exist in our absence. All through the drive home I think of her and resolve to extend a kindness to someone I haven't yet met. In this act, somehow, I plan to meet the woman I was too late to meet.

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