

Among the Eucalyptus Trees

Christine Henneberg, MS

HE WEARS A FADED COTTON SWEATSHIRT the color of green apples, a green and pink tie-died t-shirt, and a green drawstring skirt. Around her neck is a string of beads sprinkled with tiny spiraled sea shells, each shell threaded carefully so that their spirals turn on exactly the same axis—little planets aligned in their orbit, circling her throat. Against the white walls and the clicking and churning machinery of the ICU, she is like some fairy goddess. She should be carrying a wand, draping garlands of flowers across the monitors and I.V. poles.

Instead she is wringing her hands at his bedside, stricken. “I thought this was just going to be another bump in the road,” she says, every muscle in her face trembling with the effort of what she is enduring. “I didn’t think it was going to turn into this, I really didn’t.”

Her hair is the pale blonde of someone who has spent many hours in the sun. I can see her basking on a back porch, enjoying long, fading summer evenings, holding his hand in hers, as she does now. The skin on the backs of his hands used to match hers in its deep bronze. Today his hands are a sickly yellow, cracked and bleeding at the knuckles, bruises marking every touch.

He is 60 years old. After waiting nine years for a combined kidney-liver transplant—in the meantime battling the toxins released by his failing organs—he has finally come to the hospital with an infection from which he will not recover. He knows this, now; they both do.

He opens his eyes intermittently at the sound of her voice. He even makes occasional remarks, his voice weak but always clear—as though he is saving his energy in order to be sure that his few words may be understood.

“We just celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary,” she tells us. Her voice tinkles in a surprising English accent; I would have guessed she’d grown up in Grass Valley or Sebastopol, but no: suburban London. Somehow she made it over to California at a young age, where she found him. “He used to be up for anything,” she says. “Any night of the week, if something was happening, he wanted to go, he wanted to be a part of it. I feel so lucky to have had someone like that to share my life with, someone with so much energy.”

She leans over him and smiles longingly, brushing the hair across his forehead with her fingertips. Royal blue earrings dangle beside her jaw. Her lips form silent words intended only for him.

She turns suddenly, looking up at us. “And when you do turn off the medications,” she asks, “Then...how long?”

The doctors match her gaze. They allow just a moment to pass, a silent acknowledgement of the weight of her question. “We don’t know,” they answer. “Every person is different.”

She turns back to him, nodding slowly.

“But we do know,” the fellow bravely continues, “based on how he did on his trials off the pressor medicines a few days ago, that we shouldn’t expect to have very much time. That’s why we asked about other people he might want to see, or other things that might be important to him, and to you. Before he dies.”

It is decided: It will be tonight. She asks to view the place where we will take him once his ICU medicines are stopped, so we ascend to the 14th floor. In the stairwell her flip-flops slap against the cement steps; her toenails are painted a shimmering silver.

It is perfectly quiet inside the comfort care suite. The room has stood empty only since yesterday morning, after the death of a 90-year-old Filipino man who was briefly on our service. There is a clean hospital bed, a fold-out couch, a table and several chairs, and an expansive window, through which the afternoon sunlight pours in. The brilliant city skyline in the distance is framed, just beyond the glass, by the eucalyptus trees on Mount Sutro.

She stands there for a moment, looking out the window, watching the treetops sway back and forth. I think I see her rocking gently with them. She belongs here, among these moving creatures—not in the windowless ICU.

Outside, the sky is a brilliant blue, but fingers of white are beginning to creep in from the ocean, blowing on the breeze. “Hmm,” she says, turning from the window to face us, just barely smiling. “The fog is coming in.”

Her husband will die tonight, and she will be there beside him.

That is what she is preparing for. As I hang up my white coat and pack my backpack to head home, I suddenly understand this. She is preparing to face the ordeal that she fears more than anything else in the world, the very thing she probably never imagined she would have to do, even through all these years of his sickness. She will do this

thing tonight—and she will do it without him there to comfort her. Like the eucalyptus trees in the fog, she will stand up somehow, miraculously, in the face of the mightiest wind.

Sometimes the strength of another human being is almost too much to bear.

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