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LONG-TERM EXPOSURE

NO PULSE, NO BREATHING, no response to painful stimulus: they were in agreement on all that, on the fact of death. It seemed, though, that defenses were jelling, that sides were forming, that everything else was subject to argument.

“Dr. Ganju, the cardiologist, was consulted, and he spoke to the daughter about repairing the valve through an artery, because the patient wasn’t a candidate for surgery. The daughter understood the poor prognosis and she refused further treatment. The daughter decided on comfort care only, and hospice was consulted, as per the daughter’s request. At five A.M., the patient expired and was pronounced dead by the medical resident in the presence of the daughter.”

That was how the attending physician wrote it up, apparently with opposing counsel in mind, because that was not how Kate, the daughter, remembered it.

Everyone had their own way of seeing things. Liz, her sister, was finding it easiest to be angry. Liz went on about root causes, how their mother died from pesticides, because her aide didn’t wash the fruit. Ed, Kate’s twin, blamed their father, said he had bullied her to death. Bob, the firstborn, was dealing with the loss in yet another way. He faulted their mother, including her thrift (though her thrift put him through college).

“She economized her way into the grave,” Bob had said. “She should have taken her pills as prescribed. She shouldn’t have cut them in two.”

Bob drove stylish cars and wore stylish clothes, and he was ashamed that she made bookshelves from weathered boards and old pipes (though that was art, really).

“She was a pioneer of the recycling movement,” he said with a snort. “But it’s over now,” he said, shouldering her out of his life; “*La messe est dite*,” he said, tamping her down underground.

They all had their own narratives. But sooner or later they all twisted everything around so Kate was at fault whenever anything went wrong.

She had never heard of comfort care until the doctor recommended it, describing a cocktail of morphine and lorazepam, which sounded like Kate's kind of cocktail. She was straight at the time, though, as straight as straight can be.

Her gadget vibrated with a mail from Liz, who was on the road in Asia, on business. She had attached a study on pesticides and cardiovascular disease, on a possible link between them. Establishing that link wouldn't bring their mother back, but it would sooth whatever regrets Liz was having. It would also keep Liz off her back, so she skimmed the study and sent a mail fanning Liz's outrage. Then she threw away the discharge summary, because she would need counsel if her siblings saw it.

The coffee machine finished gurgling, and Kate poured a cup before tending the Christmas tree she got for her dad, who lived alone now. The tree was little and cute, and she watered it every day, grooming it for a spot in the yard, where he could watch it grow. It was the first Christmas since his wife died, and Kate wanted to make it nice for him, because he was sad, as was she, over her mother's decline, her slide into a muddle where words combined randomly.

"We've got a couple of snow blowers," she said towards the end. "They're in the attic."

Surely she meant one snow blower. Surely she meant the garage. Once she knew where everything was, every single button, screw, and pin. At the end she made things up.

"The dinner plates are out back, in the yard," she said once.

That tore Kate up, and when Kate hurt she sought relief.

In that instance she fell for an inheritance scam, and after she lost her money her belief in the Church changed, became belief in the lottery. Since then she had concluded that death was just getting through, that's it, just getting through life, which was an extension of how she viewed existence these days. She would rather have seen and done, would rather have events behind her. She understood why her dad stayed put now, day after day, year after year, planted in his recliner. She would too, if she could afford it.

It was time for the numbers, and she snapped the radio on low and huddled by it, saying "C'mon, c'mon," praying, then slumping, then crumpling her ticket as her father stirred in his sleep downstairs.

Lately she had been stopping by after her night shift to tidy up and make him breakfast if he woke. That didn't happen much, which was good, because she was tired after eight hours of grinding grain. She trudged around in a tight circle at that job, blinders on, head hanging, like a weary old horse turning a mill. But she looked up as her father groaned. It sounded like a nail being levered out of wood. It sounded like grief or an old, old grievance, and Kate felt a pang, a tangle of remorse and rancor, grief and grievance sprouting from the same seed.

She hadn't understood degeneration and death, and towards the end of her mother's life she had grumbled about the television. "It's really loud," she said once, and her mother turned it off, shrinking like a scolded child.

She had been too sharp with her mother too often.

Kate wiped up pudding her father had spilled. She supposed the fresh tracksuit she talked him into yesterday had pudding on it too. But life had not always been a tragic chore.

The line drive screamed around the mound a foot off the ground; the runners on first and second took off; and Kate, playing second, dove to her right, snagged the drive, tagged second, and side armed the ball to first: triple play, one, two, three. Her ragged team of engineers erupted into cheers for Kate, their secret weapon, the slim, pretty secretary who regularly drove in runs, blasting doubles over unsuspecting heads.

The triple play was a high point. But her hip might not hurt if she hadn't been so impetuous back then. Nothing was at stake in that game. It was just the company league. But she would have stopped the ball with her face, her lovely face, if necessary. That was something she learned from her parents, who wrecked their bodies too, but not playing games.

"It's fun when we do it together," her mother would say when she rallied her daughters to weed the garden. She was always in motion, using up her disks, wearing them down to nothing. But she never complained. Constant activity had been normal for her.

It had been for Kate, too, for quite some time now. She bore the brunt of family life. She made the hard decisions.

"Could you repeat that?" she said when the cardiologist mentioned repairing the valve, getting at the valve through an artery.

He discouraged her from going that route: "If she was my mother, I wouldn't do it. Look, she's miserable."

That was what Kate passed on to her father and siblings. She promoted that view, wanting to spare her mother more pain. Now she wondered if she had made a mistake. The thought was hot to the touch, and she dropped it, looking forward instead. She would handle things differently for her father. She would fight to the end for him.

A singer-dancer had put out an album with "Night Divine" as a dance tune, which was annoying, and Kate clicked off the radio, wishing she had been more patient with her mother.

"Dunno," Kate said several times, absently, as her mother asked questions about the Internet.

She continued asking questions as Kate tried to fix the connection, down on her knees behind the desk, checking plugs and jiggling cords. It was dusty, and she sneezed.

"Will my e-mails be there?" her mother said as technical support put Kate on hold. She muttered, but she had other repairs to make while she waited: a faucet that dripped, a vent that rattled, and an air conditioner that leaked. "Or do the mails disappear?"

"No, your mails will be there," Kate said, skipping the lecture about servers.

Her mother wanted to know who invented the Internet, who funded the research, and who held the rights.

Kate wasn't clear on that either, and she said, "Give me a second," as she tensed and pulled out the air conditioner, which was dirty and heavy and nearly slipped out of her grasp. She gasped and put it down, bending her knees, hoping she wasn't blowing out her back. Blood rose in a cut across her palm. "When we get your computer working we'll find a site that explains all about the Internet, its history and how it works, everything, okay?"

She didn't mean to patronize, but her tone was wrong, and her mother looked away, stung. Her mother was in the habit of saying "Don't put every word on a jeweler's scale," but she was alert to slights herself, and old age was a bonanza for her.

"I'm going to take a look at the vent now," Kate said, and she squeezed her hand shut and went down the hall, letting the contretemps pass. She told

herself her mother was just making conversation. She told herself to be kinder. She told herself it was high time to scrape off the residue from adolescence, when her mother failed to rejoice when she, Kate, was elected homecoming queen and won the math contest and got her dad's old Buick running.

Her siblings made that point a lot, too.

"That was long ago," Liz said once. "You need to let that go."

"But she still does it," Kate said.

"That's because deflation is her habit," Liz said, "and she creates it by sabotaging us. 'Too bad you got my mousy brown hair,' she says; or 'Salutatorian, so close,' she says; or 'What a pity those extra ten pounds cost you the solo,' she says."

Liz had always been analytical, and she felt better when she could diagram whatever was happening—on paper. Kate worked things out in flesh and blood.

After bandaging her hand and tightening the vent, she said, "Would you like some soup?"

Her mother accepted the peace offering, but not the soup, because she had no appetite lately. "Thanks," she said, "maybe later."

Kate's neck ached as she straightened out her father's mail, which he opened now, as though his vision was good enough to find due dates, as though his hand was steady enough to write checks, as though he had his affairs under control. He made a mess of it, drenching statements in whatever he had spilled and slopping up the gizmos he ordered by mail. A courier must have been by, because he had more new contraptions: a jar opener, a telescoping backscratcher, and a jeweler's glass with a built-in light. He got them from a concern that catered to the elderly, offering everything from ionizers to panic alarms to—shockingly—sex toys, which the catalogue called sexual aides, which sounded more adult, more matter of fact, which sounded more like a truss than racy undies, more like a fertility clinic than the honeymoon suite.

Something rustled at the door, likely the blond-tailed squirrel that had been tearing up the screen. Her mother took charge of an earlier iteration of that problem, got rid of the blond's predecessor and fixed the screen using techniques from back on the farm. She was ingenious in a lot of ways. Just when Kate thought her mother had disappeared around the bend for good, she fixed a screen or built a museum-quality bookcase or slipped a knife under

Kate's ribs so cleanly that Kate couldn't make a case against her.

"Have you been here before?" Kate said as she showed her mother Long Island.

"No," her mother said. "I was going to come here once with the garden club, but you had a trip planned for us to Quebec. Then you cancelled, and it was too late to sign up with the ladies."

"Well, we're making it up now," Kate said as she drove on, grimly, on the defensive yet again, thinking Was that true? Or can she think up something that quickly?

No, no: don't put every word on a scale, she told herself, and she muttered as her gadget vibrated.

It was from her day job. She was a temp there, where she felt like a ghost, where everyone looked straight through her. She needed the hours, though, because Christmas was going to be a production this year. She had already made a fruit cake, which was aging in the cellar. She had already dug out the crèche, lights, and ornaments and started decorating. She wanted to get the whole family together for the twenty-fifth, to surround their patriarch in filial affection, to ease his bereavement. Bob, though, wouldn't be there. He had booked a ski vacation instead.

He went skiing a lot. He could afford time away from his nice, tidy office, and he wasn't having hip problems, because he had never dived for a line drive, had never sacrificed for the greater good. No, Bob struck low blows, and he kicked Kate when she was down.

"Inheritance scams have been around for a while;" that was more or less what he had said to their father, their presiding judge. He said that most folks wouldn't volunteer their account info and SSN to an unknown, bogus-sounding company. Yep, the schmuck had bad-mouthed her yet again, which Liz, in her wisdom, thought Kate should know.

She plucked the discharge summary out of the trash and tore it to pieces so Bob couldn't use it to run up the score any further. She had been absent in one way or another during her drinking career, as Bob never tired of mentioning. But she had stuck it out since going on the wagon—well, hopping on and off. She was as *au courant* as anyone the last few years.

She was as qualified as any of her siblings to make that call, which didn't happen on paper or in a nice, tidy office. Bob would criticize her for that, too, for making the decision on the fly. That was the moment, though. All the doctors—the attending physician, nephrologist, cardiologist, and pulmonologist—suddenly appeared at bedside, a delegation on a mission, angels in white, there to tell her it was time, without actually saying so.

She had been awake forty hours and was having a hot flash when the cardiologist described percutaneous intervention, i.e., repairing the valve through an artery.

She had another flash now, heat flooding her face and sweat coating her body as she carried out the trash, heart racing. But she would of course never mention her female problems to Bob. He wouldn't want to hear about menopause and how it mixed with eldercare, blending irritability, anxiety, fatigue, and sorrow, a slippery place for Kate to be, as folks at AA were always noting.

She nearly lost her footing after her mother's last surgery. "I wish Liz was here," her mother said. "But she gets so little time off with her career, with all her responsibilities."

That hurt, because Kate heard a subtext: Instead I've got you, because you don't have much of a career, do you, Kate?

She was telling herself not to weigh every word when her gadget vibrated with another mail from Liz. It seemed her job wasn't as demanding as she liked to suggest, because she was making a project out of pesticides, sending study after study. This one described a possible link with mental illness.

Kate's reflection looked back at her from the screen. She had her mother's worry lines and dazed expression. She looked older since she made her decision and her mother died.

"Good morning," her father said as he whirred up the stairs on the chair lift, a smudge of pudding on his tracksuit.

"Good morning," she said. "How're you feeling?"

"Fine, and you?" he said.

"Fine," she said. "Would you like an egg? Some hash browns?"

She swiped her sleeve across her forehead and pattered on, making conversation, telling him what she had read since yesterday. She mentioned a Canadian program for confiscating poached moose and distributing the meat to heart patients, who need low-fat protein. She was pleased she had

happened on that piece, because her father liked to talk about agriculture and nutrition, ranging far and wide, rummaging around in his memory for tidbits about herbicides, plant science, and farm animals. He had a few facts about biological values he had been trotting out for years, and he picked up the theme and expanded it to hematology and his wife's treatments for anemia.

Kate took time off to drive her mother to those treatments, which took hours, and once, as the appointment stretched on, as her mother continued to sit absolutely still, as ordered, iron dripping into her arm, Kate checked her mail on her gadget.

"Oh, you could be off with your friends, but you're stuck here," her mother said.

"No, no, it's fun when we do it together," Kate said.

Her gadget vibrated, and she glanced at it.

"Go ahead, answer it," her mother said.

The cancer patients getting their chemo looked on as sternly as Spaniards at a funeral, and her mother sat there, heavy with abnegation.

That was something Ed didn't understand about their mother. He overlooked the provocations that led to the bullying.

Once their mother mentioned their father had wanted to switch to navigation when his eyes got too bad for flying. "Too bad he couldn't find time to study for the test." That was what she said—though he could hear her, was sitting in the next room, as she knew.

Kate wondered where the line was between her mother's dementia and her mother herself. She wondered when one became whatever ailed one, a cancer patient, say. She often wondered if it was her mother or the dementia that was talking. But then her mother likely wondered the same thing about her, Kate, and alcoholism. She supposed her mother didn't remember much of what she said, just as she, Kate, didn't remember much from her drunken ramblings, thank God.

"... food-borne illnesses," her father was saying.

He had his own brain issues, but he had never lost interest in aircraft, science, and world affairs. Her mother, though, had gradually stopped talking about music and her translation work. As she aged, she started to gossip, to

play politics, and Kate supposed that might have had something to do with cognitive problems caused by pesticides or her medications.

Things started coming unglued after her mother's hysterectomy, back in the dark ages of gynecology, when ovaries were routinely ripped out and hormone therapy was as subtle as a hammer. That was when Kate was first grounded for nothing, for being attractive, successful, and happy. She was at a pool party with the other eighth graders, and they were about to have hot dogs when her father turned up in uniform. He had been away for months for the air force, and she was surprised and happy to see him. That, though, was when he turned on her. He took her by the arm and marched her away, saying that she hadn't done her chores, that she was to come straight home from school henceforth, that she was to stay there to help out.

After he left on another trip, Kate appealed to her mother: What about her cello lessons? What about the chess club?

"There's nothing I can do," her mother said. "He's made his decision."

Kate had thus vegetated at home, resenting her father and discovering the liquor cabinet.

Now, though, she thought she knew what happened. She could see him coming home tired after months of flying all over the world. She could see her mother, weirded out on hormones and wanting to whine, but unable to mention her female problems. So she complained about Kate, who happened to be out at that moment—as Bob doubtless noted.

Kate hadn't thought of that in years, and she supposed she was like her siblings after all, intent on assigning blame for every single thing. She liked to think, though, that everyone, with the possible exception of Bob, tried to do the best they could. But everyone wanted to look good doing it, or at least look better than the next guy. That was what caused the problems.

As yet, no one had mentioned her second-hand smoke. She had that to look forward to, because Bob turned sibling rivalry into a street fight, with chains and crowbars.

"... a plant that secretes acid to kill off neighboring plants," her father was saying.

He had been doused with Agent Orange, and he took an interest in poisons, an idiosyncrasy Liz had caught. Liz had started repeating herself, too, already, without ever having been in flesh and blood combat, the kind with bombers and biological warfare. She had observed several times that

their mother wouldn't look at a map or decide on a restaurant or hotel, which left her free to complain about being lost and salty meals and lumpy beds.

"It's just a thin, harmless-looking reed," her father was saying, "but its acid is so toxic that it disintegrates the structural protein in the roots of neighboring plants."

It was funny how a few facts and stories stuck, such as the one about a trichinosis outbreak in New York. He had mentioned that over and over, whenever his wife served pork, and that was another explanation for why she got mean. She wasn't like that when Kate was little, when she sat Kate on her lap and turned flashcards into entertainment, when she baked and let Kate lick the spoon.

Ach, that hurt, that cold, cavernous absence where her mother once was, wearing an apron, that bottomless pit, that void into which one might fall, clutching at emptiness.

Emptiness where her mother had ever more maddeningly been, becoming cantankerous over time, maybe because of the plaque on her cerebellum, which the discharge summary mentioned.

It was easier to make excuses for her now that she was dead, now that she, Kate, no longer had to live with the insanity, including the tricks her mother played with the television after Kate complained that one time, that one, single time about the volume.

"I'm trying to be quiet so I don't disturb you," her mother sometimes said thereafter, turning off the set when Kate was vacuuming, when it didn't matter. But when Kate was on the phone, trying to straighten out her parents' bills, trying to figure out what, if anything, they had paid, her mother turned the volume back up.

Sometimes it seemed she and her mother did each other more harm than good. Their roots were all knotted up; they strangled each other. Maybe she, Kate, should have cut herself free, somehow. But neither Bob nor Liz nor Ed could have explained the issue to the anesthesiologist when their mother had a gastroscopy. They had no idea her hemoglobin was at eight and her iron at seven.

"Thanks, that's helpful," the anesthesiologist said, and Kate blushed, gratified, a rare moment, for her mother's diminution was long, slow, and difficult to witness.

Her mother made light of it when she forgot to turn off a burner on the stove. But she seemed to sense that she could no longer count on herself. Kate supposed it was frightening to be dependent on her, Kate, given the low opinion her mother had of her. Kate thus tried even harder to make everything right, including arguing with insurance companies over benefits; including tracking down refundable deposits that rehab clerks pocketed; including finding things her mother put away, including her wallet, passport, and checkbook, which turned up in the recycling, freezer, and laundry, respectively.

“Yes, you’re doing an amazing amount of work,” Bob said once, making a point of saying it mechanically, humoring her, winking behind her back, “and we’re all incredibly grateful.”

He had no idea what it was like on the front line. She was the one who experienced their mother’s deficits up close, on her daily visits.

“No, no,” Kate said to her mother, who was scraping a knife down the edge of her computer screen, down the edge of something she was reading. “What are you trying to do?” Kate said as she took the knife away from her mother.

“I want to cut out this article on Japanese beetles,” her mother said. “I want to show it to the ladies in the garden club.”

Her father, who worried about salmonella, was not eating his egg. He was talking about getting rid of his wife’s insecticides and weedkillers, and as Kate heated him cornbread she worried about what Bob might insinuate. Her difficulties with their mother had never been a secret. She had, though, tried to win her mother’s affection. She never gave up, even when her mother’s filter came all the way off.

“Your father has Bob, I’ve got Ed and Liz, and then there is you,” her mother had said.

Those words weighed a lot. They were crushing. So Kate converted them into air, into an abstraction, having learned from Liz of late. Kate supposed it wasn’t necessarily a mother’s fault when she couldn’t love her child. Then it often happens that one can’t love someone one has wronged, out of jealousy, say. Indeed, sometimes one actively dislikes, even hates that person,

thus justifying having done them harm. Of course that could work both ways, could turn into a dynamic, a battle, a war.

“Whom were you trying to spare more pain?” Bob might well say. “Mom or yourself?”

The phone rang. It was Bob making his daily one-minute call to their father.

“So you won’t have to look for her wallet, passport, and checkbook anymore.” That was something Bob might well say.

She would forestall those remarks. She would second Bob the next time he bad-mouthed the dead, making their mother responsible for her own death, making their mother responsible for something, at last.

No, that wasn’t fair, either.

They were all rewriting history, for their own reasons. How easy it was to leave out this, to emphasize that, shading here, exaggerating there. They were all playing politics, and none of them had an excuse, yet, couldn’t pass it off as a symptom of some malaise. Liz hadn’t noted their mother’s aversion to maps was a relatively new development. Liz hadn’t harkened back to days gone by, when their mother brought up the rear, breaking down camp and then setting it back up again, time after time, as her husband transferred from country to country. Kate could have piped up, should have mentioned how their mother ran the show until her husband came home from Vietnam, she went on hormones, and her offspring entered puberty, which happened in quick succession, which threw a different light on her character and accomplishments.

Too bad their mother didn’t tout the concerts she played, the books she translated, the houses she made habitable as the family wondered the planet. Perhaps she thought none of that deserved mention. Perhaps she had forgotten. Too bad she couldn’t stand by her record as a whole, instead said “Don’t weigh every word,” meaning don’t trust your comprehension, meaning don’t hold me accountable.

“You’re doing a good job with the Christmas decorations,” her father said. “The pine smells good.”

“Yes, it’s refreshing, isn’t it?” Kate said, flushing over the praise.

She hummed “Night Divine” as she scooted the Christmas tree into a better light. But a branch tilted, then fell off.

“Oh, no,” Kate said as she discovered the tree was a swindle; it wasn’t alive, wasn’t a tree at all. It had no roots and no trunk. It was just branches

stuck into foam. Kate slumped, disappointed, a feeling she knew well, as did her father, as had her mother. The difference was that her father could sit with the feeling, could let it pass, whereas her mother courted it and Kate sought relief.

Her glance darted to her mother's opioids.

"Did you see the discharge summary?" her father said.

Ah-ha: that explained the jeweler's glass by the pudding cups. She held her breath, wishing the living will had been clearer. She wanted to say that she had stopped it with her face, her once-lovely face, had sacrificed for the greater good.

"You did the right thing," he said, rendering his verdict, deciding the case once and for all, "and I'll tell your siblings that."