

Janette T. Hospital

The Dark Wood

Angela turned off the car radio, not wanting to hear about Princess Margaret and boyfriend. Not at sixty on the turnpike with one death behind her and another one waiting ahead.

She wondered: why do I always pick the wrong men? She was surely second only to Her Highness in that respect, although she had been sufficiently adroit never to marry her mistakes and had been spared the embarrassment of having her terminal romances splashed across the international press.

And of course her work helped. She could become so absorbed in cases that she would not remember if there was anyone waiting for her at home or not. When she thought 'home' she meant whichever one-and-a-half-room studio her Bokharas, pillows, and plants were gracing at that moment. She travelled light. Decorating style: expensive stark. Portable elegance. Nothing that could not be relocated in three trips of her MG with car rack. She moved in and out of her life.

On the turnpike she played with her blinkers like a magician, changing lanes, moving, weaving, dodging. Disengaging. Brendan, however, kept circling her consciousness like the foggy rings around Saturn. Brendan and his children, Brendan and his crisis, Brendan and his importunate pleading eyes. Persistent as the green Chrysler dogging her, arrogantly suffusing her rear-view mirror. With deft timing she slithered into a momentary space in the next lane then back into the fast lane two cars ahead. The Chrysler, she saw with pleasure, was a dwindling green dot in her mirror.

She thought with contempt: all my men have been tailgaters. Clinging. Hampering.

Well, there it was. Death of another relationship. She could not be encumbered with the debris of Brendan's life when her work was so important, people depending on her, matters of life and death. There had been, of course, gray spaces of betrayal in his eyes. That was the way it was with her men. Impossible demands and messy endings.

But this was misting away at the periphery of her mind. She changed lanes, jockeying for the exit. She always stayed in the fast lane until the last possible minute, defying entanglement, winning the off ramp. She parked in her reserved space at the hospital.

Odors come coded. The brackish tang of seaweed can sting the nostrils and suddenly one is feeling for a pitted anklet of scars and hearing an old scream hurtle off the rocks, childhood blood spurting from oyster shells.

Angela smelled the familiar wave of disinfectant, bed pans, assorted medicinal fumes, and felt invigorated. Other people might turn faint at that smell but Angela inhaled power. Within its ambience she had a certain license to bind and loose. She made mortal arrangements.

Her case load was heavy but it was the latest admission which most immediately concerned her. The bed of Beatrice Grossetti floated in its own haze of mustiness. The smell of the last century, thought Angela; of oiled furniture and old photographs; the smell of a person long unused.

Only a small fetal arc disturbed the bedding but the face on the pillow was gnomelike and ancient. Angela glanced at her clipboard and was startled to discover that Beatrice Grossetti was only fifty years old. No living relatives. Weight: eighty pounds.

The ancient eyes of the middle-aged child-body opened.

"Good morning, Miss Grossetti."

"Mrs. Grossetti. Are you the doctor?"

"Not a medical doctor. I'm here to help you sort out anything that might be worrying you."

The eyes closed again.

"I thought the clergy did that."

"They do, if that's what you prefer. Would you like to see a priest?"

"No." The eyes, startled and skittish as dragonflies, darted out from cover. "I don't know . . . Perhaps later . . . Is it so urgent?"

She was wounded now, a cornered animal.

Angela, releaser of traps, liberator of caged spirits, sat beside the bed.

"No rush," she said.

She was confident that the timing depended on her patient and herself. None of her cases had ever gone before they were ready. She had a certain knack, and the dying have instincts of their own.

"You will know when. And I will be with you."

Mrs. Grossetti's face contorted itself into what would have been a scream if any sound had come out. Drowning, drowning, shrieked the eyes, and she clutched wildly at Angela who took both gnarled hands between her own, leaning forward to press them against her cheek.

"It's all right, it's all right," she murmured. "You're not alone. I am with you."

"How can *knowing* . . . how can just the *knowing* . . . ?"

The voice of Mrs. Grossetti struggled violently to assert itself over some rushing undertow.

"Two days ago everything was . . . *usual*. Slow and weak . . . just the usual slow and weak . . . just age. I watered my geraniums and my tomatoes. They're ripening so I have to watch out for the pigeons . . . I grow them in my window box you know, they'll be ready in about ten days . . . And then my . . . Mr. Bernstein, the man in my little super-market . . . he said—such a nice gentleman—he said: 'I'm worried about you, Beatrice. You're looking a little thinner every time I see you. I wish you'd see a doctor.' And just to please him, you know . . ."

There was a long pause while Mrs. Grossetti's forces deployed themselves. They tapped some wild energy of insight and she sat up abruptly.

"But nothing has changed! Just *knowing* cannot make any difference. Nothing has changed! I want my tomatoes!"

She slumped back wearily.

"Couldn't I go home to my tomatoes?" she pleaded. "Don't you think I could just stay home until . . ." She turned to the wall. "If anything is going to happen, I'd rather be home. I *would* like to see my tomatoes ripen. I'm frightened here. Couldn't I go home? Nothing has really happened, except the knowing. Couldn't I go home, please? Just *knowing* can't make any difference."

"It always does make a difference. For everyone."

"I want to *un-know*! I only came as a favor to Mr. Bernstein. Now I want to go away again. Couldn't I, please? Please? . . ."

After a while Angela gently freed herself from the pleading fingers closed tightly on sleep and security.

It was well known to the friends of Dr. Angela Carson that she did not like to be paged for personal calls while she was at the hospital. Although she did not explain it in so many words, it seemed to her as obscene as surreptitiously reading a paperback (neatly hidden inside

the prayer book) at a funeral service. Consequently when she was summoned to the phone she knew it would be Brendan. No one else, at the moment anyway, would be so rash and desperate. Jacob would have done the same thing once. And then Charles. But there it was again. Birds of a feather.

"Angela, we have to talk. I can't believe you meant what you said yesterday. I'll pick you up at the hospital this evening and we'll go out for dinner. You've been over-reacting because you're overworked."

"Brendan, you know I hate to be called here. Anything you might have to say is irrelevant to me while I am working."

He said wearily: "Angela, I fail to see how some sort of semi-human robot can help the dying."

"Goody-bye, Brendan."

"Angela! For god's sake! I don't even understand what happened. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything. I have responsibilities."

"But a visit, for heaven's sake? Do you want me to surrender the right ever to see my children?"

"Of course not. But you can't expect me to get involved in that sort of draining familial situation."

"What's draining about a visit that's already *over*? You're being so irrational . . ."

She replaced the receiver delicately on its hook.

In all honesty, she thought, I cannot blame myself for this fiasco. She had not, after all, been anticipating overnight visits from his children. Infrequent or otherwise.

Angela's profession placed her under a heavy moral obligation. The dying cannot postpone the gathering up of loose ends and the settling of accounts. She owed it to her cases to lead an uncluttered life, to be capable of undivided attention, compassion, total commitment.

As Angela reached the door of Beatrice Grossetti's room, a young intern was moving a stethoscope about her body, pausing and listening, his face creased with solemn inner deliberation. As though he were sounding an old hull for seaworthiness, Angela thought.

"Doctor?" asked Mrs. Grossetti in a small apologetic voice. "What can you tell me?"

As she spoke she reached out tentatively, supplicatingly, and touched his arm. The young intern flinched, moving aside to put his equipment back in its case.

"You're in good hands, Mrs. Grossetti," he smiled paternally. "We'll take expert care of you here."

He nodded at Angela as he left the room, flushing slightly before the direct baleful impact of her eyes. It was curious, she thought with anger, the way so many people cringed from contact with death. As though it were catching. As though the patient were already a leper, an outcast, no longer one of us. She had seen it in doctors, relatives, visitors.

The familiar look of shame suffused Mrs. Grossetti's face, the embarrassment of imposing on the living. Angela saw the tears and instinctively leaned over and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"Tell me about yourself, Mrs. Grossetti. Tell me how you came to have your beautiful name. Beatrice has always been one of my favorites, especially if you pronounce it the Italian way."

"I can't blame them I suppose. It's natural, isn't it?" replied Mrs. Grossetti who walked down her own paths. "You are different though. I suppose you see so many . . . so much of this . . . it seems ordinary to you."

"I do see a lot. Perhaps the difference is the doctors are fighting *against* death. But you see I share it, I stay with my patients. You will not be alone."

"Are you afraid of being alone?"

Angela was disconcerted.

"No! Oh no. Not myself. I don't want *you* to feel alone."

"I would feel less alone with my geraniums and tomatoes than here. It is very cruel to keep me here. I've lived, you know. I've seen a lot. Buried my only child and my husband. And a good many friends. I've seen a lot of . . . not as many as you perhaps, but I'm no stranger to . . . at least, I didn't think I was."

Mrs. Grossetti drifted in and out of sleep. Angela had other cases to attend to and she came and went. But she checked back with Beatrice every hour. She had an instinct about these things.

Sometimes the frail body stirred and whimpered, and Angela would sit and hold her hand.

"Mrs. Grossetti? I'm here. Is there anything you want?"

"Beatrice. My name is Beatrice."

"It's such a beautiful name."

"My father loved Dante. He taught in a college. My father, that is. You know Dante's Beatrice?"

"Yes indeed. I took one whole course on him in college myself. The professor used to make us recite the Italian aloud because it sounded so beautiful. *I' son Beatrice che ti faccio andare . . .*"

"Is that the part where she meets him in paradise?"

"No. It's at the beginning, in the dark wood. When he was lost and afraid."

"Such a luxury. To believe there was somebody waiting for him . . . And then finally all that light and peace. Do you believe it?"

"I don't know."

"I used to. I wish I still could."

"That's not so important. I do know that death itself is a moment of joy and peacefulness. I can *promise* you. I have *seen* it over and over again."

"But after that you can't know, can you? I wish I'd never been a Catholic. It keeps you scared up to your very last breath."

"Do you want to see a priest?"

"Not yet, not yet. I want to see my tomatoes ripen."

Beatrice slept again and Angela went about her rounds.

The surfacing into speech was less frequent, the exchanges with Beatrice more fragmented as the afternoon wore on.

"It is so strange," she said once, quite suddenly, "to think of the tomatoes ripening next week without me. Ripening and rotting all by themselves."

Acceptance, Angela thought. The final stage.

"Shall I bring a priest now?"

Beatrice opened her eyes and turned to face Angela.

"You're in such a hurry, doctor. Determined to see me off properly, aren't you?"

"You are a Catholic, Beatrice. It is customary . . ."

"Yes, yes. For the final promises. And will you believe him? Will you find the promises reassuring?"

Angela, caught off guard, almost said: I'm not the one who is dying.

Instead she said: "It is what *you* believe that matters, Beatrice."

"It doesn't matter to you yet, doctor. Things *are*, things *are*—whatever we believe. I believed I was healthy two days ago."

She sighed and seemed to lapse back into sleep. Angela was about to go but Beatrice seized her hand.

"Don't go, doctor. I'm afraid. I'm so frightened."

Angela slipped her arm under the trembling shoulders. On impulse she raised Beatrice and cuddled her as though she were a small child. The figure felt light as an infant. Angela rocked back and forth on the bed, crooning softly.

As Beatrice slithered back across the hazy border into unconsciousness her fingers curled themselves tightly as tendrils around Angela's wrist. The head, under its wispy halo of silver gray, sank a little more heavily against Angela's shoulder. Angela made no attempt to extricate herself. She continued to rock back and forth, cradling the small sheet-swaddled bundle of Beatrice, singing a lullaby.

The eyes of the night-shift nurse widened. She stood indecisively in the doorway with her tray of medications. Dr. Angela Carson seemed oblivious to her presence so she left again. It was something, she thought with wonder, to recount at coffee break.

An orderly arrived with a note. Angela surfaced as from a great depth, swaying slightly, to read it.

"Tell him I can't come down," she said. "I have to work all night."

She went on stroking Beatrice's hair, rocking, singing.

Shortly after midnight, Beatrice began to struggle.

"No!" she cried out. "No! No! No!"

"Shall I bring a priest?"

"No! No!"

Angela held her tightly. "It's all right, Beatrice. I'm here. It's all right."

Beatrice was gasping, scooping in air with a greedy bronchial rattling. Her body tightened and bucked. Angela buzzed for the nurse and for emergency help, whispering caressingly: "Let go, Beatrice. Just relax and let go now. It's easy, it's not worth hanging on. I promise you peace. You're *there* now."

With wholly unexpected energy Beatrice slapped Angela across the face.

"You are making me sick," she said with low intense clarity. "If it's so easy, why don't you try it?"

And then quietly, very quietly, like a baleful Cassandra: "I see the skull behind your face, doctor. Go away, you fool, go away, go away, go away!"

Angela backed away from the crescendo of hysteria, disoriented, drunken as a ship snagged suddenly on an uncharted rock. She had a sensation of internal puncture, of ominous seepage. She made way for nurses and the doctor, she moved like a sleepwalker down the corridor.

The gasping breath of Beatrice, a rattling network of panic and malevolent laughter, billowed after her like a vast cobweb, endlessly sticky, grotesquely caressing, wisping away gradually before the blessings of sedation.

Angela sat trembling behind the wheel of her car, poised at the mouth of the entry ramp, unable to propel herself into the slipstream of the turnpike. Already she was reproaching herself for a moment of professional inadequacy. Never before had she allowed one of her cases to die alone. This, she saw clearly, was the cause of her distress.

So late at night the traffic was thin but it hurtled by at a menacing speed, headlamps glaring in the dark like burning eye sockets. There seemed to be a mist or fog of hazard, randomness, in the night air. Suddenly she was astonished that she had miraculously survived so many circuits of that urban racetrack.

Another car purred up the entry ramp behind her and its lights bathed her in gold. She was swamped by a panic compelling as nausea. From out of the heart of the radiance came a rhythm of horns, stern as the trumpets of angels. Beatrice stood on her dark side, mocking.

Angela felt herself to be ten years old again, teetering at the tip of the highest diving board, not knowing how to dive, distant figures far below calling encouragement, the line of people on the ladder rungs growing impatient, the board swaying precariously, no return possible.

She put her car suddenly into reverse, swerved crazily around the vehicle behind her, backed off the ramp, and returned to the parking lot at the hospital where she collapsed over her steering wheel, shaking violently.

The chill air of the parking lot sobered her. But even before she located the night nurse she knew she would be too late.

"It was very peaceful," the nurse said. "She never regained consciousness."

Of course, Angela thought, it could be explained by malevolence. Revenge against youth, against the living. Statistically it was not significant. All the others, every single one, had gone gently, slipping quietly into beatitude, grateful for her presence.

There was, she knew from years of experience, a certain amount of choice at the end. As regards timing. Beatrice had chosen to deny her the last peaceful coda. Just this once she had missed out on the epiphany. Yes.

As she grew calmer she went back to her car, but when she tried to start it the violent trembling returned. She hugged herself, shivering, and waited for the malaise to pass.